

**STRANGER
THINGS**



Fireflies

Armageddon Book 2: Song of the Fireflies by inktopia

Category: Stranger Things, 2016

Genre: Romance, Sci-Fi

Language: English

Characters: Eleven/Jane H., J. Hopper, Joyce B., Mike W.

Status: Completed

Published: 2018-07-18 12:58:49

Updated: 2018-12-09 07:19:34

Packaged: 2019-12-12 23:14:51

Rating: T

Chapters: 7

Words: 27,858

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: 'Power comes at a cost, but love is priceless.' A price that Eleven has to pay for closing the Gate. A bell tolls in the netherworld as Death rides forth to claim a life that was owed to him, but a young boy now stands in his way, wielding nothing but a promise to take Eleven to the Snowball. [Completed]

1. Inferno

Act I: Inferno

'Silence.'

It was the first word that crashed into Hopper's subconscious as he steadied himself on the platform which was swaying hundreds of feet up in the air. His ears were still ringing from the explosion that rocked the void a moment ago. He couldn't remember where he was, but it was a strange place indeed. All around him, he saw tiny white flakes fluttering in the wind as a slight updraft carried them spiraling to the top. It was eerily tranquil compared to a moment before when hundreds of raging abominations were charging the platform from all directions.

'It's too quiet,' Hopper thought as he weighed the weapon in his hand. The shotgun in his hand was spewing pungent smoke as the barrel slowly cooled down. He glanced at the gun and grimaced as he saw the empty chamber. The last projectile had taken a beast in the mouth and had thrown it across the chasm where it screamed as it fell to its death. Its brethren followed shortly. Maybe the threat was over since the gate was finally closed for good, but he still wouldn't take chances. He instinctively looked around for shotgun shells to reload his gun. There wasn't enough light to see clearly, so he studied the wall in front of him. It had gone dark now, but a moment ago it was glowing fiercely with a red...

'THE GATE!'

Suddenly he was pulled back into reality, and he felt a small frame clutched tightly to his sweat-soaked shirt. He took a deep breath and looked at the angel lying in his arms. Hopper didn't believe in God since Sarah went away, but his lack of faith was questioned today when he saw the most magnificent sight any man could ever hope to see in his entire lifetime. He saw an angel from heaven, arms spread out like those in Roman paintings, blocking the monstrous tentacle of a Titan, while at the same time, closing a massive gate from hell, all with only her mind. He felt a shiver running down his spine.

After all, Hopper's daughter, with all her powers and rage, was a mere 'Human.'

After spending nearly six months with Eleven in a locked-up cabin, Hopper was becoming frustrated with a curious problem. He had already started thinking of Eleven as his daughter. Maybe not by blood, but he still loved her as a part of his own soul. Oh, she was a handful all right, while during tantrums most kids would toss toys and break dolls, Eleven would break bookshelves and throw sofas. It wasn't that big of a challenge, he was well aware of the risks of adopting a telekinetic girl with heavenly endowments who was reaching into her puberty. And to worsen it further, she was craving the propinquity of a boy named Mike Wheeler, and that threw a wrench into an already complicated situation. Hopper had noticed that Eleven would start blushing furiously whenever Mike came into the casual conversation. He didn't know what Mike did to her, but he respected the boy nonetheless because he had managed to break down a wall which was beyond the reach of mortal beings. Mike Wheeler had brought life into the decaying heart of Eleven, who was being forged into a soulless weapon in the dark corridors of Hawkins National Laboratory.

As of a result of this bond, Eleven nurtured a limitless affection towards Mike and any harm to him would hurl her into wrath that threatened to destroy the very house in which they were living. During one such incident, Eleven tried to escape to save Mike from two bullies that were beating him up. Jim captured her, and in a fit of rage, she uprooted a gigantic tree and flung it a hundred meter away. Then she passed out as blood came rushing through her nose and ears. Even her eyes were leaking tears of blood. Jim was scared shitless that day because he didn't know what to do and whom to call for help. But she recovered, somehow. This peculiar phenomenon was repeating itself quite often, and that scared the life out of Hopper.

The very next day after the incident with the tree, Hopper called up John, who served with him in the army medical corps back in Vietnam. He didn't tell the exact truth of course, but he gave enough information so that John could diagnose the problem. John said that

whenever any human became stressed or enraged or was engaged in physical activity, their blood pressure would rise as the heart beat faster to pump more blood throughout their body. It was required to carry more oxygen which would then be combusted to produce more energy.

"Think of it like a Nitrous boost in a jacked-up car," John sounded serious. Because of this increased pressure, the veins and arteries throughout the body would swell. The phenomenon was normal and happened with not just humans but every animal out there. But the problem with Hopper's daughter was that her veins and arteries were a little delicate compared to others and couldn't handle the increased pressure. So, sometimes they would rupture.

"Think of this like the gasket blowing up due to increased pressure from the Nitro boost." John was entirely serious, Hopper could tell.

Not every vein or artery would rupture, only the thin ones that couldn't take the stress would give way to the pressure. The human head was riddled with such thin arteries and veins, especially the nose, ears, and BRAIN. John said that the nose and ear bleed could be managed somehow, but if veins and arteries ruptured in her brain, she could die from intracranial hemorrhage.

"Please ensure that she isn't put under a lot of stress or physical activity. Protect her, Jim," John was the father of two girls himself. Hopper didn't understand a single word of the scientific mumbo-jumbo, but he heard the words that he needed to hear. Next day, Hopper requested Eleven to never use her powers when she was in the house. He had also decided to control his temper around her. He hated hemorrhages.

Back in the elevator shaft, Hopper hugged Eleven tightly in his arms and kept muttering softly, "It's over, you did good kid, you did really good."

In reality, he was assuring himself. The void was utterly dark so he couldn't see Eleven's face anymore. But he could feel her as he softly ran his palms over her face. But a moment later, he rapidly jerked his hand back as if he had touched venom. He felt the sticky, warm

liquid that was smeared all over her face.

'Shit, how much blood did she lose this time?' Hopper almost panicked. It was all over her face and neck, and even her eyes felt swollen. Suddenly she went limp and collapsed in his arms. He tried to check her vitals as best he could, but the blasted shotgun light flickered and abruptly went off as soon as Eleven closed the gate. He felt a faint pulse as it was slowly getting weaker.

"DAMN IT," he growled in his throat and stood up. The power was gone, but the elevator had a backup. He pressed the up button, but it didn't work.

"FUCK," he shouted and smashed the stock of his shotgun on the button. The large motor came to life and then it took them forever to reach to the top.

Once they reached upside, Hopper finally witnessed the real magnitude of the devastation caused by those atrocities from hell. The disfigured bodies of those four-legged monsters laid all around him, twitching in odd ways. He could hear them breathing their last breath through their strange-looking mouths. Here and there lied human bodies, some half-eaten, some worse. He didn't have the time to check for survivors because he had a life to save. Hopper started moving ahead while gently carrying Eleven in his arms. He was afraid of tripping because she might not survive the fall. He reached the control room and carefully laid Eleven down on a table.

Fortunately, the lights were working here. Hopper swiveled the desk lamp on her face and cursed breathlessly as he saw the extent of the damage. She looked like an abomination herself. Her face was bloodied and veins popped around her temple. The skin was pale while blood poured out of her eyes and masked her beautiful face. This never happened before, *'Not as much as this.'* Suddenly a wave of nausea hit him, she looked like his daughter Sarah taking her last breath as the doctors tried to resuscitate her. He wanted to break down the wall in front of him and carry her someplace safe and save her. He had already decided to give his life up to protect her, but he knew that the appetite of the black hole would not be satisfied so quickly. His heart started beating faster.

Eleven breathed slowly and whispered, "Mike...," and proceeded to cough up blood. She kept whispering his name in a raspy voice. Hopper wished that the Wheeler kid was here, maybe he could do something to save her. But the fact was that Hopper didn't know what to do. His worst nightmare had come back to play a game of chess with him, and this time he was losing again. He ravaged through the cabinets. He needed blood and first aid, though he had no idea what could be used to stop the intracranial bleeding. He glanced at Eleven and winced in pain. She looked like the fake body that was discovered while searching for Will. Blood dripped from her nose and ears and slowly pooled into a dark shape at the feet of the table.

"Shit, hold on kid, HOLD ON," Hopper screamed as he broke the lock to the industrial refrigerator with a plus sign. It was mil-spec, so it was supposed to contain blood. He kicked the door open and saw torn blood packs lying everywhere. Two monsters laid motionless, apparently enjoying the free meal until the very last minute. There was a gigantic hole in the wall that led to the office beside the refrigerator, and it looked like a slaughterhouse. Hopper came running back to Eleven.

'Fuck it,' he decided to take her to the Hospital, then let her get captured by the Military if it came to that. But for now, she needed to live. Hopper was a grungy war veteran and a small-town cop, he didn't have the necessary medical skills to save his daughter.

Hopper carefully picked her up in his arms and cried in alarm as her head lolled over his arms. Eleven spoke faintly, "Mike..., Promise..., Please..." Hopper stopped dead in his tracks as he remembered the day he made that promise to her.

'You would get to see Mike one day,' he had promised her. To be honest, he never intended to keep the promise in the first place until the coast was clear. But he never planned to bury his second daughter in the same lifetime. It was amazing that how a little change in perspective could turn men from benefactors into malefactors.

Hopper steeled his jaw and decided to do something that he never imagined having to do in a million years. He chose to let faith

override his judgment. Hopper had seen plenty of wounds back in Vietnam. He had seen wounds that bled out and realized that it was too late to take her to the hospital. But the promise! If it meant that much to her, then maybe it could save her life. It was scientifically impossible, but he had heard Mike Wheeler's words before, "I've seen many impossibilities turning into possibilities in those ten days, I choose to believe..."

So, he believed. At long last he accepted faith, and he hoped it was not too late.

"Mike!" Eleven opened her eyes for a brief moment, "Will... you... take me to the Snowball?" The words drove a cold knife in his heart. Hopper didn't believe in God since Sarah had died but standing there with the limp and bloodied body in his hands, he couldn't help but pray to the almighty to save Eleven. He reached the van in a hurry and gently placed her on the front seat. Then as he was trying to put the seatbelt on Eleven, she threw up a large volume of blood. *'Shit, it's getting too late.'* Hopper winced in pain as he reached the driver seat. Then for the first time since Vietnam, drove a car without touching the brake at all.

The road was utterly devoid of any signs of life. The power lines had already given way, and the only source of light remaining was the twin high beams that sliced the darkness in front of the car. Hopper wasn't paying much attention to his driving because his mind kept pulling him back to the past. A voice echoed in his mind, *'Frame these moments Jim. She's going away forever. It's time to wake up.'*

Tears came streaming down his cheeks as Hopper tried his best to navigate the car through a narrow bend. The rear of the vehicle crashed into a battered signpost and flung it away. But he didn't give a fuck. He was not driving in the present anymore.

It was a cold afternoon, a week after the girl named Eleven had disappeared into a shade of black mist when Hopper finally felt something strange was going on. Until that moment he had never cared much about the lab-rat that had taken shelter in Mike Wheeler's house for ten days. Of course, he felt a tinge of guilt for turning her in, but now that she was gone, he wasn't in a hurry to

look for her. In reality, he was scared of her powers and believed that the lab would be the best place to keep her safe and to keep the world safe from her abilities. But he knew that she was alive, he had received strict instructions from the lab to keep his eyes open for strange activities. The scientists were sure that Eleven had not died during Event Zero, the term they had given to her final battle against the abomination.

"Subject Eleven is too powerful to die from something as simple as that," the new lead scientist named Dr. Sam Owens had confirmed multiple times. But now that she was finally gone, Hopper prayed that she remained out of their lives as long as possible.

On that fateful afternoon, Hopper was sleeping peacefully in his cabin after filling his stomach with leftover pizzas and a bottle of jack. His nightmares welcomed him as he gently opened the door to the room where his daughter was fighting her fate. The vision kept repeating in different forms whenever he closed his eyes, but they all had the same outcome. At the end of the nightmare, Hopper would always find himself standing in front of a tombstone that had his daughter's name carved on it with blood. They used to keep him awake for days in the beginning, but he had gotten used to them now. Hopper moved closed to the bed where Sarah was trying her best to take a few last breaths through her weak and tired lungs. An indistinct form stood beside her bed. He was sure that it belonged to his wife, but she had no place in his nightmare. Sarah's eyes were closed, and her chest moved abnormally. Hopper looked away and waited for it to get over. But then his eyes fell on a bed with a new patient. It was odd, Hopper had never seen that patient before in his dreams. He slowly walked to the bed but stopped dead in his tracks as he looked at the face.

The body belonged to the strange girl named Eleven who had disappeared into the void weeks ago. She looked pale and sick with fever. Hopper had no idea what to do so he did the only thing that a father was supposed to do. He moved closer to the bed and laid his hand on her forehead. It was cold as ice, and she was apparently dead. He jerked his hand back as if had touched fire. Someone screamed inside him, "She's dead too. You killed her!"

Hopper grabbed the clunky machine beside the bed and threw it

across the room. He screamed in agony, "What was I supposed to do? They were going to kill me. I needed to save Will."

The voice calmly responded, "What if she was your daughter? What if she was Sarah?"

Hopper fell down beside the bed as his knees finally gave away. The world disappeared around him as he found himself kneeling in front of his daughter's tombstone. He had a sinking feeling inside his stomach. Towards his left, he noticed another new structure. He knew what it was and turned his face away. A moment later he heard a faint scream.

Hopper jerked his head towards the other tombstone as his ears picked up a faint sound. He rushed towards the other grave and placed his ears against the ground. The sound repeated itself. Someone was knocking against the wood with small and feeble hands.

"HOLD ON!" Hopper shouted as he dug his fingers in the ground. A terrible pain spread from his fingers towards his arm as he tried desperately to dig through the thick soil with his bare hands.

Hopper didn't remember for how long he had dug the grave, but sometime later he woke up in his couch, facing the ceiling. He was completely drenched in sweat; furthermore, his right hand was stuck behind his back and had already gone numb. Now, pinpricks of pain were radiating from the paralyzed tissue. The visions kept playing in his mind as if he was watching a movie. Ordinary people would often forget their dreams as soon as they had woken up. But Hopper could never forget his nightmares without drowning himself in alcohol. This time, another knot was added to the noose that strangled him every time he closed his eyes. Hopper got up from his bed and went to the cupboard to find some booze but came up empty. He cursed his fortune and made his way to the door to pick up some poison to survive the night. He opened the door and went outside to absolute darkness. A soft crunching sound came from where he landed his right shoe. Hopper looked down in surprise and found an old yellow file beneath his feet. He picked it up, dusted the cover and read the title illuminated by the faint light coming from the open doors of the cabin.

It read; 'Subject 11.'

2. Embers

Act II: Embers

Hopper flipped through the file in a quick motion. It was full of photographs, X-Rays, medical reports and some documents which were either printed or written by hand. It was a curious article, and he had no idea who had left it there. He glanced at his watch and noticed in alarm that the liquor store would close in one hour. It took him exactly one hour to drive out there from his cabin. He had to make a choice.

Hopper slammed the door as he walked inside the cabin. He made a cup of coffee and sat down on his table to read the file. The story of Eleven was not new to him, he had uncovered parts of it on his journey to find Will. But the file might throw new light on her past. *'And give me closure by showing the monstrous nature of her powers,'* Hopper grimaced as he argued against the nightmare that kept haunting him even now.

It took him the entire night to analyze every document that was kept in that file. He had gone through a liter of coffee by the time he finished reading the last report. Then he threw the file as hard as he could toward the couch and banged his fist on the table. He growled like a lion that was awakened from slumber, "MARTIN BRENNER. I'D GIVE ANYTHING TO DRAG YOU BACK FROM HELL SO I CAN KILL YOU WITH MY OWN GODDAMN HANDS."

The file contained a lot of information about the girl named subject Eleven. Most of it was incomprehensible to him. The medical reports looked like something written in Hebrew, and the X-Ray reports were just plain nonsense. But there were a set of documents that ignited a dynamite charge in his head. The scientific papers listed the experiments they had run on Eleven to measure her powers, and most of them made Hopper shiver to the core. He could never believe that something so cruel could be done to a child until he read that godforsaken file. Eleven wasn't a monster with supernatural powers, she was just an innocent child with a terrible curse. She was strange because they had turned her into a freak. Hopper had a chance to save her, but he had squandered it away.

Or had he?

Hopper looked towards the window and beheld a faint glow that diluted the absolute darkness outside. *'New beginning?'* He jumped up from his chair and walked towards the bedroom. After going through the battered wardrobe, he picked his police uniform and went to the shower. Fifteen minutes later, a police wagon raced through the streets of the sleepy town of Hawkins, Indiana. Hopper reached the school after some time and parked the car away from the main road. The agents were still lurking around to clean the place, in reality, they were looking for the girl named Eleven. Hopper walked into the school building and carefully made his way to the classroom where the tragedy had taken place one week ago.

He carefully walked below the yellow police tapes that sealed the room from intruders. Being the local police chief, he had absolute authority to enter wherever he pleased. But the agents might notice the activity and come in his way again. He wasn't afraid of those pussies who had gone to some training grounds and thought they owned the world. They wouldn't have survived even one day in the humid jungles of Vietnam. But he was afraid of them finding Eleven before he did. He had to ensure her safety at all costs.

The room had undergone multiple bouts of cleaning since that fateful night and looked almost spotless now. He would not find any evidence here, the scientists had done a thorough job. Hopper felt dejected and sat down on the floor, just like he had found Lucas and Dustin sitting here on that cursed night.

"We went to the radio room to find Will," Dustin's voice echoed in his mind. The first thing caged animals usually did after they were taken out of their prisons was to return to them. They would get scared by the new environment and would try to return to their comfort zone. Eleven had only spent a short time here, but she knew the radio room. *'What if?'* Hopper prayed as he ran towards the place where the little girl had performed her first act of heroism. He reached the room in a minute and opened the latch using the master key he had taken from the principal the other day. Then he entered the room, closed the door and brought out a flashlight. He didn't turn the light on at this early in the morning to prevent attracting undue attention. He was looking for any clue that might offer a proof that Eleven was

alive and on this side of the portal. Forensics in big cities carried luminol biomarkers to highlight crime scenes, but this was the ass end of the earth. He had to get by with the flashlight and his instincts alone. He carefully started assessing the prospective hiding spot. If she had come out of the portal that night, then she must have hidden somewhere until the agents moved away from the area. Then she probably went to visit Mike Wheeler. Hopper would get to Mike later, but for now, he just needed his confirmation.

He couldn't find jack shit even after half an hour of searching. He felt the fuse going off inside his head. There was only one thing left to do; go to the lab and hold the lead scientist at gunpoint to get some information out of him. He was about to leave the room to make the one-way journey when he noticed something peculiar about the bookshelf to his right. There were twenty-six volumes of encyclopedias carefully arranged on the shelves. They were numbered one to twenty-six, one for each letter. But the letter P was slightly off position as if a kid taken it out and then struggled to put it back at that height. *'The eleventh letter from the end'* Hopper thought as he ran to the shelf and took out the volume and opened it under the flashlight. Something was stuck between the pages. The book fell from his hand as he found a small piece of torn cloth hidden inside the pages. It matched the dress Eleven was wearing the night she surrendered to her fate.

"She left clues for Mike! Fuck!" Hopper wanted to shout but cursed instead as he predicted the repercussions of her act. He became aware that the agents could find some other breadcrumb and dedicate maximum effort to finding her. He needed to discover her quickly and erase the clues before someone else did and that included Mike Wheeler and his gang. They wouldn't be able to protect her, but a decorated war veteran might. Hopper left the school and drove to the Wheeler residence.

Hopper reached the house an hour later and pressed the bell. Karen opened the gate a few minutes later and made a face, "You?"

"Is Mike around?"

"He's sleep..."

"Mom?" A soft voice surprised them both.

Mike Wheeler had come down to the door and was staring at Hopper with a strange longing in his eyes.

'Did you expect someone else?' Hopper's eyes met Mike's before he could ask that question. The dark hollow encircling the kid's eyes spoke volumes about the massive typhoon that was spinning endlessly in his little heart. He wouldn't find any evidence here after all, Mike was apparently unaware of the fact that Eleven had survived and was present in this part of the world. Hopper felt the piece of cloth in his pocket.

'Now's not the time. I'm sorry kid, but you have to fight this one on your own until I find her,' Hopper thought but spoke something different, "Just checking. Thought he might be ready to go to school."

Karen nodded her head sadly, "In a few days. He needs time."

Hopper nodded and turned around to go back to his car.

A broken voice rang behind him, "If... you find her... you bring her to..." The voice choked up.

Hopper hardened his jaw and walked towards the car. Earlier, he was trying to find the girl to save two souls, now he needed to find her to save three. Mike Wheeler was just a kid but was oddly attached to that girl for some reason, and her absence was eating him alive.

Hopper had no luck finding Eleven in the next few weeks. He had zeroed in on a few possible locations, one of them was that goddamn forest which grew like a maze. He was slowly getting frustrated, but there was one silver lining in that dark cloud. Mike Wheeler had apparently recovered and started going to school. That took away a bit of stress, and he was back to saving two souls again. But he was making no progress at all. One day he was going through some old newspaper clippings of MkUltra program when he heard a strange commotion outside his office. Hopper sighed and slowly walked towards the door. It was probably that old guy and his haunted pumpkin patch again, he couldn't remember his name.

"Three boxes of waffles. One box every week," the old shopkeeper was leaning over the desk and trying to sell his story to Florence.

She was having none of it, "You're telling me, someone broke into your store, didn't take cash or anything else but just waffles?"

"I'm telling the truth. Three damn boxes of Eggo..." His speech was cut short as Hopper growled, "What's this?"

Over the next five minutes, he pretended to listen to the story with complete disinterest as the old shopkeeper repeated his fantasy. In short, someone was breaking into his store and stealing Eggos on a regular basis. The man finished the story, and Hopper stifled a laugh, "Florence. Lodge a complaint."

"What?"

"An Eggo thief is running arou..." Hopper broke into laughter. The others in the station started laughing too as the old shopkeeper started cursing them. There was one small difference between the behavior of Hopper and the other police officers. Unlike others who were laughing at the comedy, he was smiling in relief. He had found his marker at last. Eleven was hiding in the woods a short distance away from that store. It was time to get her and bring her home.

He was about to leave the station when he found an odd pair walking towards him. An old man with a bandage on his forehead was leaning on a youth as they slowly made their way to the desk. Other days, Hopper would have left without spending a second on their touching stories about family feuds and bar fights, but something caught his eyes. The old man was carrying a hunting rifle, but the rest of the outfit was missing. He still had his hunting trousers but didn't bring his jacket, or cap or shoes. It was as if someone had taken only the things required for survival from him.

'Damn, this is getting out of hands. Soon someone will find out,' Hopper thought as he met the pair.

Like the story of the shopkeeper, he listened to their narrative but with complete attention this time. He wanted to project the idea that he was considering this seriously. Otherwise, the man might take his

account elsewhere. Then he directed them towards Florence and almost ran to his car.

The old man was a seasoned hunter and Hopper could easily follow his instructions and find the location where the hunter was knocked out by a young witch who could do magic. He carefully made his way to the spot while making as much noise as he could. He wanted to give enough warning so Eleven could run away. There was no way he could capture her by force, she would snap his neck even before he could lay his arms on her. The first step to handle a wounded animal was to give it as much space as it needed. He found the spot with the charcoals and spent the next ten minutes returning it to its natural state. The burnt wood was a dead giveaway to Eleven's location, and if he had to disprove the man's story, he needed to get rid of the signs. Once done, he stood up and scanned the woods around him from the corner of his eyes. He was sure about one fact, no matter what the reports had said, Eleven was just a child and children are curious.

'There,' his eyes caught a barely camouflaged shape behind a bush a few meters to his right. Hopper inhaled sharply and grinned as he turned his face towards the other way to hide his expression. She was alive and standing right next to him. Now, he needed to earn her trust and bring her home before she got hurt, or probably end up hurting someone. And he was pretty sure that Eggos and Squirrels were an utterly unbalanced diet and she would be suffering from malnutrition soon.

Hopper went back to his car to fetch the supplies that he had picked up from three different stores on his way here. He was not sure about the agents and took precaution to avoid suspicion. Then he slowly entered the wood and pressed his foot against a fallen tree branch and shattered it. The dry branch broke in two with a loud crack that was probably heard from more than a dozen meters away. Hopper started walking towards his right in a slow gait while focussing on his surroundings. A minute later he heard soft footsteps a few meters behind him. He smiled as he sauntered towards a location that he had discovered a few years ago while trying to locate a missing hunter. It was a secluded spot not far from the road but covered from all the directions by large trees. Hopper reached the spot and stood

there for some time. Then he placed the heavy duffel bag on the ground and yawned as if he was oblivious about his surroundings. He felt like an absolute idiot, any sane person would see through his acting, but there was no other way. From the duffel bag, he brought out supplies one by one and arranged them in a line. The first was a small sleeping bag, suitable for a child. It was the most essential survival tool at this time of the year for someone who was hiding in the cold forests at night. A tent would have been better, but Hopper was sure that Eleven wouldn't be able to set it up, neither would she trust it if Hopper set it up instead. To her, it would appear as a trap. Next was a small bag containing a mix of both nutritious but boring foods like peas and sandwiches and exciting stuff like candies and chocolates. After placing five bottles of mineral water on the ground, Hopper brought out his trump card; a box of Eggos. Did he hear some rustling behind him? Hopper smiled, she was only a child after all. There was no reason to keep pretending anymore, Eleven must have figured out why he was here. It was time, to tell the truth.

Hopper stood up slowly and spoke, "If you start fires they will attract attention. Neither you nor I want that."

He waited for a second to receive feedbacks if there were any. Nothing came, so he continued, "If you feel cold then open that bag. There are small packets inside it."

He held up a transparent packet filled with clear liquid in his hand. Then he spoke as if he was giving a demonstration to the rookies back in Vietnam, "You hold the pack like this and press here."

Hopper pressed a metal disc inside the pack, and it made a clicking sound. Within seconds the liquid transformed into solid and generated a substantial amount of heat. He dropped the package beside him and continued, "This will give you plenty of heat. When the night falls, get into that sleeping bag, put some packs inside and break the small metal disc to make heat. You'll stay warm through the night."

He turned around to return to his truck but kept speaking, "Eat the food I've placed there. It won't all taste good, but you need it for your health. You can have the Eggos for dessert."

Hopper was almost at the edge of the forest now, and the footsteps behind were slowing down. He spoke his last words for the day, "You don't have to come out. But, if you're okay then give me a sign tomorrow. Same place, same time."

Then he drove away from the woods. His eyebrows were furrowed all the way, he kept thinking about the dangers in the forest. Eleven could fight against animals and humans, but could she escape the fangs of mother nature? A simple bout of Typhoid or another disease could kill her in days. He needed to get her home quickly.

Hopper picked up the supplies the next day and drove to the forest. He felt worried as he walked towards the designated spot. What if he couldn't find her? What if she didn't take the supplies? What if she... his thought process hit a wall as his eyes fell on the location where he had placed the supplies last night. The sleeping bag was gone, but the food wrappers were there, empty. The hollow box of Eggos was there too. *'She ate all that in a day? She must be hungry.'* He also found the used chemical heat packs. She had utilized them all. It must have been too cold here last night. It was the sign he was waiting desperately for, now he could execute his plan.

This time, Hopper left a substantial amount of supplies there including more heat packs and a small book with pictures. He had thought hard about what a girl like her might desire and couldn't come up with any ideas. So, he had picked up a comic book on his way here and hoped it would help him earn her trust a little faster. Winter was arriving with her fangs made of ice to steal the life away from this land, surviving out here would be impossible without extensive training.

It took a few more weeks of regular supply drops to the forest to earn her trust. Apart from providing food and occasional gifts, Hopper had also instructed her about hiding herself in the forest and removing traces of her activities by using techniques developed by the military. Hopper once dreamt about going camping with his daughter, and now he got the chance at last. But it wasn't exactly like how he had imagined it would be because she had stayed out of Hopper's sight so far. But the last time she had made sounds to let him know that she was around. Hopper was getting frustrated at the cat and mouse

game, but he had no options left. The agents had decreased their activity in Hawkins but were observing Mike Wheeler on a continuous rotation. A week ago, he had met Dr. Sam Owens and delivered an ultimatum, "If anything happens to that Wheeler kid, I'm gonna burn the facility down..."

"But."

"...with everyone inside."

It had worked well so far. They kept observing him but didn't try bugging his house anymore.

It was Christmas Eve when Hopper decided to make the final move. Time was running out, and winter had finally arrived in all it's destructive grandeur. He left the police station early that night and made his way to the hiding spot. By that time, he had made some small improvements to the supply drops. To protect them from the elements, he had arranged a wooden box. He reached the location, opened the box and put an Eggo inside. Then he got up and delivered the speech he had been planning for some time, "Hey kid. I hope you trust me by now. I have been providing you food for a long time, I could have brought the agents here."

Something rustled in the bush behind him. It sounded like agitated footsteps. Hopper continued at a rapid pace, "But I didn't. I want to save you. I want to protect you from the bad men. I have a home where I can hide you."

The rustling stopped. Did she leave? Damn. Hopper gritted his teeth in frustration, "Please give me a chance. I am not a bad guy. I saved Will from the upside down."

There was absolute silence. She must have left. Hopper wanted to shout in frustration, but he sighed and dealt his trump card, "Mike is waiting for you. If you stay here, you'll die and won't be able to return to him. Come with me, and I'll save you so that you can meet him one day."

There were no sounds. She was gone from the area. Hopper sighed

and turned around to return to the car. He would bring Mike here tomorrow. It was a horrible idea because the agents would surely take notice. But better be imprisoned than be dead. He would think of something later.

Hopper had almost reached the car when he heard the soft footsteps behind him again. He couldn't believe his ears. They did not fade away but increased in loudness, and then finally stopped. Hopper turned out and lost his shit. The girl was standing right in front of him, wearing the clothes she had stolen from the hunter weeks ago. It was late, and the moonlight was sparse, but he could see her eyes clearly. They were full of apprehension and hope. Hopper took off of his hat and held it against his chest in respect. Surviving in the woods was not an easy task for even full-grown men, and she was just a child. But she had finally learned to trust someone other than those four kids. He had finally won the first battle.

The girl spoke in a muffled voice, "S... S... Save me? Take t... to.. Mike?"

She was shivering from the cold, but that wasn't the reason why she had given up. She came to him to because she wanted to meet Mike Wheeler at all costs.

What the hell was this girl made of? And who was this Mike Wheeler?

Hopper spoke with a hoarse voice, "I promise."

The girl smiled and nodded. Then she slowly walked towards him, one small footstep at a time. Hopper nearly lost his balance when the figure of the girl transformed for a moment. '*Sarah?*' Hopper couldn't believe his eyes. Then he hardened his jaw and swore an oath to the heavens, "I will always protect you no matter the cost."

Back the present, the police van broke through a barrier and the sudden vibration jolted Hopper back to reality. He didn't bother looking at the figure strapped to the seat beside him. He was Eleven's father and could sense her presence without having to look at her. This time, he couldn't feel it anymore.

Hopper couldn't keep his promise, Eleven was dead.

3. Extinguished

Act III: Extinguished

Joyce hummed a tune from her childhood as she finished preparing some coffee for the kids. They hadn't eaten anything in a while, and frankly, they were struggling to stay awake. But they refused to go to sleep without meeting the heroes who had saved them from oblivion tonight. And one of them awaited patiently to fulfill the promise that was etched into the heavens above.

The doorframe creaked as Joyce stepped on it on her way out of the kitchen. It didn't surprise her. She had been assessing the cottage for the past ten minutes, and the place appeared utterly rundown. It had a roof, and it had windows, but Joyce had never seen such useless shutters in her entire life. The damned glass panes were missing. And then the rooms themselves looked like something from the Wild West movies that were designed for survival but not for comfort. Of course, Joyce knew that Hopper and Eleven needed each other and this broken-down shack provided them a shelter where they could brave the storm.

But she felt that it was the time for a change. Once Hopper came back, she would sit with him and discuss the next steps. Eleven was growing up to be an elegant woman, and she needed a feminine touch. She required dresses that were not oversized or undersized, she needed someone to help with her emotional outbursts, and most importantly, she deserved a mother. Hopper was an excellent defender and a terrifying guardian, but Joyce couldn't imagine a fruitful conversation between them about the cute boy she had fallen in love with and why he wasn't checking up on her every second of the day. She suppressed a laugh at Hopper's pathetic attempts to solve problems with brute force;

'Eleven, eat your food, it's getting cold.'

'Not till I see Mike.'

'Damn it, Wheeler! What have you done to my daughter?'

Joyce smiled when she remembered the boxes of Eggos stuffed in the freezer. People in the town were talking about the recent changes in Hopper's behavior, they thought that he had finally lost it. He was seen buying actual food and not the packed ones he used to eat. He nearly quit smoking and people also saw him buying candy for Halloween. To top it off, it was almost a year since anyone saw him in the pub which, in all respect, was his second home. No, he wasn't going crazy. Hopper was learning to become a father again. Eleven was terrific, even without using her heavenly powers, she could transform people around her and make them believe in the impossible, and for that reason, Joyce absolutely adored her. She served the coffee to the occupants of the room and sat down on the couch. Then she started thinking about the stories Will had told her after he recovered from the ordeal last year. What steps would be required to introduce Eleven to the society?

Dustin started to gulp down the coffee as fast as he could, then he took a small break to choke on some cookies and continued to burn his tongue on that bitter liquid. Lucas was whispering with the new girl, Maxine. Joyce casually glanced at them from the corner of her eyes, it was apparent that they had feelings for each other, maybe they were finally coming to terms with it.

Suddenly Jonathan came running out of the room where Will was sleeping. Joyce calmly looked at him, fully expecting to see some sort of monster chasing his eldest son. Nothing surprised her anymore.

"It's okay mom. Will's fine!" Jonathan said under his breath.

"Then?" Joyce had an uneasy feeling, Hopper! She hoped that he was okay. She couldn't handle losing two of the most important men in her life in one night.

Jonathan sighed, "Come with me."

The boys perked up, and Mike suddenly stood up, "Is El okay? I'm not getting a good feeling about her!"

Joyce tried her best to hide the shock that ran across her face. She knew about the strange attachment between Mike and Eleven, and the implications froze her blood. Jonathan looked at him, straight-

faced and said, "She's gonna be fine, okay? Hold on."

"How do you know?" Mike felt nauseous as he asked the unanswerable question. It had been 6 Hours, 59 minutes since Eleven had walked through that door, 6 Hours 55 minutes since they hugged each other as if even death couldn't pull them apart, 6 Hours 32 minutes since they looked deeply into each other's eyes and Eleven made the promise, "You won't lose me."

Like the promise Mike had made to Eleven back in the classroom, the one that drove him nearly to insanity, the one that was never going to be kept, '*Until now.*' Mike felt as if was back in the classroom where lights kept flickering and amidst the chaos, Eleven kept walking towards the monster with cold desperation in her eyes. He remembered all the memories he chose to forget. Then something snapped inside his chest. A burning pain spread from where his little heart kept beating, and he gasped as he remembered that feeling, '*A broken promise.*'

He couldn't carry his weight anymore and sat down right where he was standing. It was a wonder he didn't fall face first onto the floor.

"I just know okay. Relax." Jonathan looked away.

Joyce noticed that, and it nearly stopped her heart. Almost mechanically, she followed Jonathan into the room and looked him in the eyes. She didn't need to ask anything to his son, the silent hollow stare narrated more than words. Joyce suddenly sat down at the side of Will's bed as her legs refused to obey orders.

"Is she....? Joyce was on the verge of having a nervous breakdown again.

Jonathan held her hand tightly, "No mom, she's alive, but she's not doing well. Hopper called to inform that he's bringing her here."

"He wanted to know if Mike is still around. He said that Eleven wanted to see Mike before..." Jonathan left the words hanging in the air.

Joyce suddenly felt a strong urge to snatch away the Supercom from Jonathan's hand and throw it across the room. She hissed, "Tell

Hopper to take her to the hospital, nothing can be done here."

Jonathan's expression told Joyce that this suggestion was presented and declined.

"Then tell him to take her someplace else, I'll sneak out and come, but we can't let Mike anywhere near her."

Jonathan opened his mouth, but Joyce immediately shushed him. "You didn't notice, Jonathan. You didn't see Mike as I did back there. I have been a mother for far too long. If she's sick and something happens to her then that boy will lose his GODDAMN MIND," Joyce was silently screaming now.

"But..."

"The only thing that kept him going through the last year was the thought of seeing Eleven again, someday." Joyce fought to get the words out of her mouth, but she needed to speak them. Will had told her enough.

"Mike Wheeler spent an entire year calling out to her, every single day. And now that he found her, he won't be able to handle her..." Joyce also left the word hanging in the air. She was afraid of speaking it out loud.

"They're kids. Goddamn it!" Joyce was about to lose her shit, but she didn't care. She snatched the Supercom and pressed the button, but there was only static.

"Hopper, come in Hopper. PICK... UP... THIS... GOD... DAMN... PHONE."

Silence.

Joyce threw the blasted device towards the wall and it shattered to pieces. She felt so exhausted that she couldn't process information anymore. It felt like losing a child all over again. No, a stray thought nested in her mind, *'You're about to lose your daughter.'*

She was about to lose Eleven, a girl who made her believe in magic.

She knew what Eleven was and what she was not. Eleven wasn't a normal girl, she was simply remarkable. Some children are born into wealth, some are born into poverty, some are born into misery, some are born into contentment. But Eleven was unique because she was born into nothing. She never knew her birth parents, yet somehow had a father named Martin Brenner. The man did an excellent job of bringing her up. First, he stole her freedom, then he seized her soul, and finally, he destroyed her humanity. Eleven was doomed to a lifetime of misery and pain, hiding from society and using her powers to spread the suffering throughout the world. She was born to be a weapon, and she was destined to die as one.

Then one fateful evening she met three ordinary boys from a sleeping town named Hawkins, and then something extraordinary happened. She learned to trust, to laugh and to love. She learned to live for the first time in her life, but it was painful to witness how short that life would ultimately be. Eleven didn't want much from this world. She could've taken whatever she wanted by the sheer virtue of her enormous power. But she never wanted anything fancy, she didn't want a beautiful dress, or cool jewelry, or an expensive house. During her days in the purgatory, she only wanted to disappear from this world to end her suffering. A rather simple ask which was never fulfilled. But then she found Mike Wheeler, and he's the only thing she had ever wanted since that fateful night.

'All Eleven ever desired was a small tent to live in, some Eggos for breakfast, lunch, dinner, and someone to assure her that she was pretty,' it wrenched Joyce's heart to think about Eleven's wants. What She craved was a beggar's alms, and this fucking world couldn't even give that to her.

Joyce got up and observed Mike sitting outside with his head buried in his knees. She didn't know everything, but she felt it all. This night might take not one, not two, but three victims. Jim would probably shoot himself to escape the loss. Back then he had his wife to help him brave the storm, now there will be nothing left for him to fight. But poor Mike! How much torture can a child take? She moved towards him while fully expecting to pull the trigger of the gun aimed at the boy's head. Suddenly there was a loud screeching noise outside. Joyce ran towards the door as Mike jumped up and ended up

throwing himself over Lucas. Dustin's face was thrust into the coffee, and he cried out in agony, "Son of a bitch!"

Joyce opened the door and saw Hopper climbing out of the car with a limp body in his arms. His face was covered by the shadow projected by his wide-brimmed hat, but his demeanor answered everything. Hopper had just committed the gravest sin in his life, and he wanted to run away from her gaze. He tried to hide in a secret place where his past couldn't find him. But he couldn't. The veteran inside him kept pushing him forward to perform his last act of valor. Hopper walked towards the cabin, and after a quick glance into what he was carrying, Joyce wanted to throw up. Eleven's face was covered in blood but looked pale underneath and veins popped around her eyes turning it into a dark hollow that was dug deep into her eye sockets. Pasty skin clung to her body, and Joyce could have sworn that she saw pink flesh beneath it.

"Move," Hopper said in a cold and indifferent voice.

Joyce pleaded, "No, please no, oh God!"

"Please, I can't..." The voice came from somewhere deep inside of the man who was now running on fumes.

He was going to collapse at any moment. Joyce looked at his face, but it was blank as if he was not even aware of his surroundings. It appeared as if he was the one who had died tonight. No, he was already dead, but it wasn't recorded yet. Reluctantly, she gave way, and Hopper carried his daughter in the room. Joyce followed in tow with tears crashing down her cheek. Hopper gently lowered Eleven on the couch and fell backward as if he couldn't carry her weight anymore. Eleven kept lying there without any sign of life. Joyce saw the blue ribbon wrapped around her wrist, and it hit her like a ten-ton truck coming through the fog.

"Sarah! You've accepted..." She choked up and looked at Hopper. There was no response, the man had just lost his second daughter too.

Mike ran toward him, "It's about time Hopper, thought you ran off

with her again."

He grinned a smile of relief and stood beside Eleven. Then he clasped her hand tightly in his own and bent over to speak to her. Joyce wanted to scream, losing Will to a monster was nothing close to the horror she was about to witness, but Hopper stopped her. His eyes were bloodshot, "Believe," he whispered to the mother of two kids.

Mike took a moment to compose himself, it had been a long time. In reality, it had been an eternity since he held her hand and spoke to her as if the world didn't exist around them. Eleven looked sick. But he had seen her like this once before, and that didn't leave any good memories;

Flash; Eleven walking towards the monster, her eyes burning in a fury that could have stopped Hercules in his tracks.

Flash; Eleven disappearing in the upside down leaving a faint trace of ash that formed into a heart before coming down to rest on the ground.

Flash; Eleven freezing to death in the wilderness of the woods, Mike trying his best to keep her alive.

Flash; Mike slipping and falling to death in the bottomless depth of the abandoned quarry and Eleven's guardian appearing in the nick of time to save him.

No, all these nightmares were over now. Eleven was back, and she kept her promise. Mike glanced at her face and grimaced, she didn't have so much blood on her face back then. But it could be cleaned up after she woke up. The adults were here, they would help her become 'Pretty' again.

"Hey El." he said in a hoarse voice, "You... I..."

He was suddenly at a loss for words. Weird, that never happened before. He could always speak to Eleven no matter how dejected or sad he was feeling. He suddenly forgot where he was. He was pulled back at the moment when he had kissed her, and finally, he recollected the words he wanted to say.

"Okay, El. You're sick, like back then, but this time you'll be okay.

We're all here, and there's no monster this time. I'm taking you home, right now. I still have the tent up, and my mom always keeps Eggos in the fridge."

"We'll eat lots of Eggos, and... and..., I'm sure Nancy would give you her dress, till then you can wear mine."

"You see, I've grown a lot taller than you in the last year. So, my clothes might not fit you properly, but I'll rig something up."

"You remember the Millennium Falcon? Yeah, my dad wanted me to sell it, but I kept it. You couldn't fly it last time when Dustin asked you. This time we'll go see Star Wars, and we'll eat popcorn, once you see how it flies you can do the Kessel run."

"I've always wanted to be a pilot, like Han Solo... You could be Princess..."

Suddenly Mike felt an odd sensation, how long had he been speaking? He looked back and was surprised that no one had approached them from the crowd.

"Hey guys, can you at least give a towel or something?" He spoke with mock frustration.

He saw Hopper slumped in the ground with his hat covering his face and he was shaking visibly. Nancy was crying while Jonathan simply looked away. Joyce was standing right beside Dustin, who sat on the ground mumbling something incoherent. Lucas held Max's hand so tightly that his knuckles were almost white. Max was also crying. Steve was resting with his back against the wall but kept his face covered with his palm.

'*Who died?*' Mike mused as he tried to guess what was going on. Then out of nowhere, something hit him like a spiked bat to his face. The realization came like a rushing torrent of water heading in the wake of a flash flood. As long as he had been standing here, Eleven hadn't spoken a single word. He looked at the couch and then saw her for the first time.

"NO... NO... NO... NO..." Mike screamed in pain. '*Please, no.*' She

wasn't breathing, her chest wasn't moving, and he couldn't feel her pulse. He held his finger near her nose. Nothing. He stood up but didn't let go of Eleven's hand.

"THIS IS A DREAM! EL CAN'T BE..." He shouted but couldn't find the last word that he was looking for. That's strange because he wasn't stupid, he tried to recognize the word that flashed by his subconscious at the speed of light, it rhymed with... *'Red?'*

'No, she isn't ...' Something was preventing the word from coming into Mike's mind. He gritted his teeth and whispered, "She is just gone for some time. She will come back to me, like every damn time."

He desperately wanted her to disappear like last time. Then maybe she would come back to him, *'She PROMISED.'*

He felt the darkness looming inside him and trying to hide away the past. It desperately wanted to erase whatever memories Mike had with Eleven because it could sense the impending doom.

'But those are good memories, right?' He wasn't sure anymore. He held her cold hands inside his own and felt numb and defeated.

'Lost? Nope, not that word.' He didn't feel the pain anymore. His sore ankle where the vine grabbed him didn't bother him, the cut near his shoulder didn't exist anymore. He felt fine. He turned around and suddenly felt tears streaking down his cheek. A familiar voice breathed in his head, *'DEAD.'*

Mike collapsed to the ground. Suddenly two strong hands gripped him from behind.

"Got you big guy. Relax, I got you." Steve held his limp body firmly and lowered him down. The others finally looked away. A moment later, Joyce sat down beside Mike, and gently placed a hand on his shoulder. She wasn't crying anymore. For the first time in his life, Jonathan saw her mother surrendering to fate.

Mike still held Eleven's hand in a tight grip. Joyce sighed and started muttering to the unknown, "It'll be okay. We need you to be strong Mike. She wouldn't want you to be a weak right? Listen to my voice,

Mike."

'MIKE?'

A scream raced through his consciousness, and the darkness inside his soul finally enveloped his mind.

The floor suddenly vanished as Mike dropped straight through a massive hole that appeared out of nowhere. He screamed all the way down but didn't fall to his death as expected. A gentle wind carried him slowly to the pitch black ground that ran towards the infinity. A moment later, Mike opened his eyes and stared at the sky above, there were no stars. With a shock, he realized that he wasn't feeling tired anymore. It was as if all the exhaustion was suddenly wiped out from his body by magic. He climbed onto his legs and started looking around. He was curious. Was he dead? It wasn't so bad, maybe the upside down was actually the afterlife? He looked around but couldn't see anything except darkness. He couldn't remember where he was but felt the immense loss hidden inside his soul. He sat down and put his head between his knees and started crying.

Suddenly he felt a touch on his soul. It was a crazy feeling as if someone was reaching into the deepest depths of his chest and bringing out all the darkest memories from the bottom of his heart. The unnatural force was destroying the barriers erected by his subconscious to save his sanity. It kept searching for something, then it discovered what it was looking for and retired as the external pressure slowly lifted from Mike's heart.

The floodgates were finally opened, and it all came back to him, the memories of Eleven; *Halcyon days*. There weren't many memories, to be honest, even Nancy probably had more with Steve. Mike had replayed them so many times in his mind that he could probably count the number of times Eleven had smiled while she was with him. They would've shattered his soul even a few hours ago, but the reaction was different this time. Mike didn't lose his sanity and did not go crazy, he smiled sardonically at his fate. Eleven was dead, and nothing mattered anymore, pain could no longer touch a person who had embraced it. Both Mike and Eleven had finally surrendered to their fate tonight.

He was sure that he had died along with Eleven, but even in the afterlife, they were not destined to unite. What was the belief he used to nurture when he was searching for Eleven?

'We'll meet, either in this life or the next and we'll be together forever.'

No, it was never meant to be. He finally accepted the fact as he stopped believing in fairy tales of oaths and promises. Mike sat down on the ground and looked at the sky above. Then he closed his eyes and whispered, "You can take Eleven away from me, but you'll never take away her memories."

It wasn't an oath, it was a challenge to the most powerful force in existence. Mike Wheeler had just declared war on Fate. Then he sailed into the unknown void in search of the greatest weapon forged by mankind;

Destiny.

4. Ashes

Act IV: Ashes

A short distance from the cabin where a tragedy was being drafted, a town was about to drift into sleep. It was late, and most of the households had already gone dark. But just a few hours ago the town had burst into activity as the residents left their routines to come out onto the streets in response to the strange phenomenon that had taken them in absolute surprise. Karen Wheeler could distinctly recollect the incident when all the lights of the house had flared up all at once. She had nearly lost her shit, but before she could run away with Holly in her arms, the lights had slowly returned to their usual intensity. Probably a dozen calls to the local power station made by the residents had gone unanswered, which was another strange phenomenon in itself. Karen couldn't remember the last time a call to the Hawkins National Lab was not picked up before two rings.

She shivered as she remembered the other incidents that had rocked their quiet town a year back; Will Byers had gone missing in the woods for almost a week before he was rescued by Jim Hopper. On the same night, her son, Mike Wheeler encountered a Russian spy in his school and nearly lost his life. But the threats had actually started almost a week back when her daughter's friend Barbara had also disappeared in the woods and was never found again. Something strange was strangling the peaceful town of Hawkins and Karen could not shake off the feeling that Mike and Nancy knew more about them than they let on. Maybe one day she could...

"Karen? KAREN?"

Karen dropped the book from her hands in alarm and quickly got out of the bath. She could clearly discern the alarm in her husband's voice. As far as she could remember, Ted had rarely gotten excited in his life. So, what was so important that he was almost yelling? Before she could wrap the towel around her body, Ted crashed through the door and found his wife standing naked in front of the bathtub.

Before Karen could let out a faint mocking scream, Ted started

speaking in a rush, "Have you seen the flower vase?"

Great, the man finds his wife in the bath, and all he could think about is the... FLOWER VASE?'

"WHAT?" Karen screamed as she realized what Ted was looking for.

"The flower vase you and..."

Karen didn't let her husband finish and interjected angrily, "I remember the flower vase. I also remember the promise you made me Ted. You were never to bring that up in this house, EVER AGAIN."

Ted sighed and spoke quietly, "I remember. But I need to find it, please."

"Why?" Karen was somewhat intrigued now. Ted had never shown so much excitement even when KFC opened a new outlet near their house, what had gotten into him?

Ted started stuttering, "I... had... you know. It's not..."

Karen wrapped the towel around her body and went to her husband. She often forgot the young accountant she fell in love with all those years ago. Ted may appear different now, but deep inside he was still the same man who placed his family above everything else. Karen touched her husband's face and spoke softly, "You had a dream?"

"How did you..." Ted was simply amazed.

"Cause, I'm me, and you're you," Karen chuckled, "Now tell me."

"I saw Mike." Ted blurted out the words as Karen breathed sharply.

"Then?"

"He was running around the house looking for something. I caught him, and when he looked at me, I found him crying."

Karen covered her mouth with her palm as Ted continued, "I asked him what was wrong. He said that the Promise has been broken and

he needed to find the vase right now to forge it back."

Karen spoke quietly, "That's nonsense. The promise was never broken because SHE WAS NEVER BORN," she shouted the last words as if trying to convince herself.

Ted shook his head and spoke, "I know it doesn't make much sense. But I'm getting an odd feeling about it all. Help me find the vase, please."

Karen sighed but agreed a second later, "Alright. But once we find it, you are coming straight to bed."

Ted nodded eagerly as if he couldn't believe it would be so easy. But he had no clue that Karen had a similar dream almost one year back on the same night Mike had nearly died in the school. Her dream was a bit different though; she saw an indistinct shape standing in front of the door to the Wheeler residence, waiting to enter but couldn't. When she had asked the figure what it wanted, it had replied in a broken voice, *'You Promised'*. And then it disappeared in a cloud of grey mist as Karen felt a searing pain in her heart and a feeling of loss that stayed with her for days. Although it was an impossible idea, somewhere deep inside her heart, Karen could almost recognize that indistinct figure that should not exist in this world. She had never discussed her dream with anyone, but maybe the flower vase would give her the answer. After all, it was the embodiment of the promise they had made to that woman all those years ago.

The couple left the bathroom in search of the artifact that had probably lost its significance when unknowing to them, Eleven had surrendered to her fate. They would probably never get the chance to find how close they were in keeping their last promise.

Back in the endless nightmare, Mike couldn't remember for how long he had been sitting on the dark ground that stretched to the infinity. The magical force that had healed his wounds and taken away his fatigue was finally gone. He felt cold, hungry and sad. But it wasn't the cold that bothered him, it was something wet, like... suddenly he felt something at his feet. He looked down and saw a strange dark liquid covering the ground which was dry even a few minutes ago.

The fluid was only inches thick but spread all around him, shining like black glass and reflecting the endless darkness above him. Then he was shocked to realize that he could faintly see the wet surface around him. There was no light here, but there was a faint glow that was coming from above. Mike looked up, and his jaw dropped as he witnessed a cloud of glitter above his head. It was composed of tiny pulses of light vibrating in a chaotic rhythm.

Fireflies,' Mike understood what they were. The lights were nothing but thousands of Fireflies that kept flying above his head, circling his body in an endless flight. They provided the light as well as the warmth that he desperately needed at the moment. Mike squinted his eyes and noticed that they were not just green but varied in a multitude of colors, he wanted to get a better look. A moment later, the cloud descended towards him as if they had heard his request. Mike felt awed as the divine light encircled him and provided some measure of comfort in that vast and cruel sea of darkness.

Mike instinctively put out his finger, and an orange-colored insect landed on it. Immediately something thrust him forward, and he was engulfed by a white tunnel. He was hurled forward through the tunnel at the speed of thought, and before he could scream, he found himself sitting on a chair inside a strange room. The room had a white colored floor, white walls, and white ceiling. The surrounding was extraordinarily bright, and it took a moment for Mike's eyes to adjust to the glare that nearly blinded him. Then he saw the man who was standing in front of him. He wore a black suit and had white hair, but his face was still a blur. Mike felt as if he had known that man forever, but he didn't recall meeting someone like that in his entire life. Suddenly he felt scared as he realized that he needed to please that man at all cost.

'Oh, how much he wants to please him. Whatever that man asks, Eleven will do.' Mike inhaled sharply at that thought. No, he was Mike, not Eleven. He needed to remember that she was gone.

The man spoke in a soothing voice that reminded Mike of his grandfather, "Focus on the table."

Mike acted without thinking and looked down on the table in front of him. On top of the table rested a can of coke. He felt thirsty, so he

reached out to grab the drink. A fraction of a second later, he felt a cold metallic touch to his ribs and realized that something had gone terribly wrong. He stared in amazement as another man in a white apron pushed a metallic rod toward his chest. The feeling came slowly, and a second later, the rod made a buzzing sound. Mike felt a jolt spreading from the point where it had touched his ribs. Then he felt a horrible wave of pain and nausea that made him wretch violently.

"Now now, Eleven." The man said in a soothing tone, "You need to follow instructions."

Mike struggled to move his shaking hands away from the table. The metallic rod was pulled back immediately, but he could still feel the touch. His ribs were on fire, and the pain came in waves. He gasped for breath and howled like an animal.

Back in the cabin where a tragedy was being concluded, Steve held Mike in his arms. The boy had passed out. *'Poor kid,'* Steve thought, *'if only I was there.'* He didn't know what he could've done, but he would've done something. He had seen Mike's devotion towards Eleven and felt the need to save the kid at all costs. But he had failed, just like everyone in this room right now.

On their way back from the tunnel, the kids told him everything about the last year. Steve listened with rapt attention, but he had a hard time believing all of it. Especially the part about the inseparable bond between Mike and Eleven. They were just kids, what did they understand about love? Then he took one look into Mike's eyes and believed every damn word of it. Mike cared for that girl in a way that even Steve was never able to care for Nancy. Steve smiled as he swerved the car towards Hopper's cabin. Mike Wheeler had achieved something that no one could have dared to try in the world. He had healed a terrible wound with nothing but innocence and affection.

Steve, the *'King'* of Hawkins School, had taken a liking to this bunch of fierce heroes. They were fearless, relentless and most importantly, they were willing to go to any length to help their friends. He had earlier made a joke to Nancy about being a damn good babysitter. On his way back from the tunnel, Steve realized that he wasn't a

babysitter, he was a King who had found his army in these five kids. He had laughed when Dustin gave out their names in a serious face, "The Ranger, The Bard, The Cleric, The Paladin, and The Zoomer. And Eleven is our mage."

'And now their Mage was dead, and the Paladin has fallen.'

Nancy came running to help her brother. Steve looked at her with a determined face, "Wait, I've got him. Just give me some space. Someone bring some water, damn it."

Lucas ran to the kitchen.

Steve made up his mind and whispered quietly, "I'm sorry for what happened today, but you'll overcome this loss and become strong one day. One day you'll become King of Hawkins School, and no one would be able to take that away from you. But on that day, you would also realize that some things are out of even a King's reach. You would realize that there wasn't a single thing you could've done that night which would have made a goddamn difference."

The world wasn't fair. Eleven, the girl who saved them, was lying dead on the couch. Mike, the only one who believed that she could do it, was lying unconscious in Steve's arms. A love story so pure and innocent that the world had to tear away the pages to rewrite it. Steve sighed and felt a drop of water running down his cheek. Damn fuck, he was crying in front of Nancy and Jonathan and pretty much everyone. But it felt okay to cry. He wanted to apologize to Eleven, "I couldn't save you. But I'll damn well save Mike, promise. I'll always be there for him and his friends."

Mike was still in the room with the white walls and ceiling. He was crying and begging for the pain to stop. But then he looked at the man in the Black suit and gasped as he felt the impending doom. He couldn't do what the man wanted him to do. In fact, he had no fucking clue about what that man wanted from him or how he was supposed to please him. The other man in the apron raised the metallic rod again and came towards him slowly and gently as if he had been doing this for quite some time.

"Please, no, not the pain..."

Something inside him woke from slumber and looked through his eyes in defiance. The can was suddenly crushed by an invisible but vehement force that shivered him to the core. He didn't know how he did it, but it made the man happy. Mike fought a wave of nausea and felt a warm fluid coming out of his nostril. It reached his lips. *'It's sour, it's... Blood.'* Mike felt dizzy and hungry, and his head was going to split apart.

'Was this how Eleven felt every time she had to use her powers? And this is just a can but when she lifted the van...' Mike couldn't think anymore.

It wasn't impressive, it was actually sickening. The power raged inside of him, threatening to pull apart every cell in his body. It was a terrible and violent force that was waiting to unleash itself on this world. He looked at the man with white hairs in disgust as realization dawned on him. The man would die tonight, she would crush him like that can. But then the man came forward, and he felt the power seeping away from his body and going back to slumber. Mike felt a massive headache, not to mention the sudden hunger that followed. He wanted to get this over with.

'She wants to die,' the realization hit him like a crushing anvil. Suddenly he was hurled out of the chair and thrown back into the darkness.

Mike stood still in the void. The fireflies were dancing around him, blinking, and calling to him. He felt a sickening feeling in his stomach.

"Superpower my ass, this is like fighting someone with a sword while holding the blade" he shouted at the darkness surrounding him.

Mike suddenly remembered the day when Eleven had to use her power for a few hours continuously while Mike and his gang were trying to find the gate using compasses. Two hours of fighting that enormous power while walking alongside them. He cursed as he remembered how Eleven had begged him to turn back because she was feeling sick. But Mike Wheeler didn't listen to her plea, he kept pushing her to her limits, and she endured the suffering because she

didn't want to disappoint him. *'FUCK.'*

Without thinking, he stretched out his arm and caught a blue firefly. Then it happened again. The throw, the white tunnel, then... *'Darkness.'*

Back in the lab where the end of the world had commenced, an old man with white hairs and wearing a lab coat painfully made his way to the central lab. Dr. Owens had never felt luckier than he was feeling at that moment. He was sure that he would be dying tonight, along with the rest of the world but Subject Eleven had saved them all.

'Just like she was supposed to,' he started humming a tune as he walked towards the table with a working lamp but stopped with a hiccup as he saw the pool of semi-dried blood. There were no bodies around, and the pattern clearly indicated that a person had bled severely from their head while lying on the table. *'The hemorrhage,'* he started limping to the wing towards his left as fast as his wounded leg would allow him. A few excruciating minutes later he reached a room and crashed through the door. Then he made his way to the bed and tried kneeling down but his wounded knees gave away, and he fell down on the ground. Before losing consciousness for the second time that day, he remembered the face of a woman who had lost everything in her life, then everything went dark around him.

At that exact moment but beyond the reaches of time and space, Mike Wheeler was running through the woods in the night. It was raining heavily, and he was soaked to the bones. His feet hurt because he had no shoes. Pinpricks of pain spread from the bottom of his feet, and Mike realized that his feet were bleeding. It hurt like hell, but he kept running. Suddenly his feet got tangled in a root, and he fell down and hit a stump. The fall injured his shoulder, and he wanted to cry out in pain but forced himself to swallow the scream. The bad men were coming for *her*, no... for him. He got up to run again and was blinded by a light. He wanted to run away from the light, but something stopped *her*... no him... *'What is going on? Why am I keep thinking myself as El?'* Mike shook his head angrily.

Then he almost turned to run away but suddenly felt as if a pair of soft but steady hands had gripped him and was pulling him out of a dark void that was trying to swallow *her*. The pair of soft arms then secured *her* in a tight embrace.

'He is here, the one whom she had been trying to find even though she had never known him. She had felt him calling to her. The boy who knew, the boy who felt and the boy who cared. At long last, two souls who were destined to be together had discovered each other in the void. It felt like an eternity.' A massive thunderclap shook the air as *she* gave in and rested *her* head on his shoulder. She would never have to run again.

The lights went out. Mike stared in disbelief as the figures moved towards him. An ethereal figure walked towards himself and spoke earnestly, "Hi!"

The real Mike Wheeler kept looking in awe as his jaw dropped, *'Was this actually what happened that night?'*

Did Eleven know at that exact moment that Mike was the one she had always been searching for? It wasn't just a coincidence, she didn't randomly become attached to him like everyone thought. She had been searching for him ever since she had opened her eyes for the first time.

'But why?' Mike wondered but didn't give a damn. With deep regret, he realized that he had also been doing the same. They were both looking for each other since the day they were born. He had no answer for this feeling but there wasn't a single element of doubt in the emotions they expressed for each other. Mike's mirror-image moved close to *her* and spoke earnestly, "Who are you?"

He was shivering in *her* rain-soaked dress and didn't have the energy left to answer the question.

'Why are you asking, you already know.' Mike berated his image. It was freezing, rainwater seeped through *her* shirt and made him feel wet and cold. The doppelganger took off his jacket and came towards him.

"The hell are you doing?" Lucas was half amazed and half angry.

Mike put the jacket on *her* and then gently held onto his shoulders as *her* feet gave away. He spoke with in a kind voice, "Let's take her home."

Flashback, this time Mike felt it coming, he embraced it and was returned into the endless void.

Joyce took the water from Lucas's shaking hands, dipped a cloth in it and gently rubbed it on Mike's face. Nancy stood against the wall, a worried look darkened her face. Dustin was pacing the room, and Lucas just stood there, resolute but broken.

"We all got broken tonight, didn't we?" Joyce muttered to herself as she slowly made peace with this new reality.

A few miles from the cabin, an old man was not ready to give up just yet. Dr. Owens regained consciousness sometime later and managed to sit up with a painful groan. Then he ran his hand below the bed, opened a secret compartment and took out a small vial containing a clear fluid. Even after all these years, the panacea appeared the same, and it would definitely perform its duty tonight. But a moment later he cursed loudly as he remembered that he had no clue about the whereabouts of the patient. He knew where Hopper lived, but he also knew that he didn't keep Eleven there. The paranoid police officer probably hid Eleven somewhere in the woods which had skipped the radar of the agents. Only if the chief knew which side Dr. Owens stood, he might have revealed this information. *'And save his daughter's life,'* Dr. Owens gritted his teeth in frustration and yelled defiantly, "There are more than one ways to fulfill a prophecy, Teresa. HE WILL SAVE HER." He paused for a moment and spoke inaudibly, "So that she can save him."

Then he walked out of the room in search of salvation.

A/N: Hi everyone. It's been almost two months since I had published anything and I am so sorry for this gap. I had a few kinks in my life and I am happy to declare that things are back in gears now. I am back to writing in full throttle and there will be weekly updates to all my works from now on.

Please let me know what you think about this chapter. It's been too long since I've penned my thoughts and I am afraid that the quality might have gone down. It feels great to be back and hold onto your seats. Things are going to go epic soon.

5. Spark

Act V - Spark

"Dad. Where do people go when they die?"

"What?" Ted Wheeler clearly didn't anticipate such a philosophical question from his young son.

Mike pointed at the photograph hanging on Ted's bedroom wall and spoke, "Grandpa..."

Ted turned his head towards the portrait and sighed, "We don't know son."

Mike scratched his head as if trying to understand the limitation of his father's knowledge. He was clearly uncomfortable about the concept of the unknown. He spoke with a quizzical look, "So they just disappear?"

Ted sat down beside his son, ran his hand through his hair and smiled, "Not completely. They leave something behind."

"What?" Mike was curious about the grand secret.

Ted took a moment to compose himself and spoke with a gentle tone, "When people pass away, they leave memories behind. Like the baseball cap Grandpa gave you. Or when the time he took you to the game last week."

"But what if I lose them or forget them?" Mike seemed distressed at that thought.

Ted held Mike's hand and stood up, "Come with me."

A few minutes later the father-son duo left the house and walked to the shrubs at the back of the residence. Ted kept his palms wrapped around Mike's eyes as he guided him to the spot he had in his mind. Then he removed his palms, and the scene in front of them took Mike's breath away. He gasped at the thousands of lights blinking in a continuous rhythm in their backyard. He spoke with a suppressed

excitement, "Fireflies?"

Ted nodded and spoke, "Yes. You see the lights?"

"Yes."

"What are they doing?"

Mike answered the question without thinking, "They are turning off and on."

"That's right, son. Memories are just like Fireflies. At times in life, you might forget his memories, but they will always come back. In the darkest nights, they will provide you the light you need to remember him."

"Ted... TED?"

Ted was suddenly yanked out of his trance by the irritated voice. He spoke in a hurry, "Yeah honey?"

Karen sniffed at her unmindful husband, "Have you finished searching the desks?"

Ted carefully dropped the old photograph inside the drawer and closed it. Then he opened another drawer to search for the useless artifact as time kept running out.

Somewhere beyond the realm of hope, Mike Wheeler stood on a dark ground looking at the thousands of colorful fireflies flying around him. He had already seen a few visions and had discovered a terrible pattern in the memories of Eleven burning inside them. It was now clear that the orange, red, yellow and the other fiery colors were the painful recollections. The red one was especially sickening and made him throw up. He distinctly remembered the fluffy white cat that she could not kill, the punishment room where she had embraced her destructive power, him jerking his head and snapping the man's spinal cord like a twig, Papa carrying her gently as she sobbed and bled from her nose and ears.

He searched for the blue, green and white ones. They were the happy

reminiscences, but they were so few in numbers. He touched them one by one and was shocked at each revelation; the lazy boy, the cycle ride, the radio, the eggos, the quarry. It looked like every moment she spent with him was full of glee and happiness. Even the night where he yelled at her near the quarry for lying to him. Mike pondered, *'that couldn't have been joyful, could it?'*

'No, she felt happy because she had finally found someone who felt sad when she had broken his trust. In her past life, all she had ever received for betrayal was anger and pain,' Mike felt dizzy as he connected the dots from the memories he had seen earlier.

Out of sheer curiosity, Mike touched a green firefly and was suddenly pulled into a room. It looked like a comfy cabin but was almost run down underneath. He found himself sitting in front of the TV which played static. Suddenly, there was a knock at the door. Without even looking behind, *she* opened the door with his mind. *'Damn it,'* he was slipping again. He was just the spectator, but he wasn't a girl. *'I AM NOT EL,'* Mike shouted inside his mind and turned his head backward. The door opened as Hopper stepped in quickly and locked it behind him. He was utterly drenched from the rain, but he gave a warm smile when he looked at *her*. Mike felt like puking, but *she* felt happy to see Hopper. He wanted to hug him. *'That's weird,'* he hated that son of a bitch. He had lied to Mike through his teeth about Eleven. Mike remembered the excuses Hopper used to give when the party kept finding him in the woods. He cursed softly, "Looking for the Mayor's cat. You asshole!"

Hopper took out a bag and brought out two boxes of Eggos, and *her* eyes lit up for a second. Hopper coughed, "I checked up on Mike today."

Mike's heart jumped. 'What? What the actual fu...'

"He's doing okay. I met the two bullies, Troy, and his partner. They'll never touch him as long as they are alive."

Mike felt dumbfounded as he recalled the strange incident. While searching for Eleven in the Woods one day, he met Troy and proceeded to get severely beaten up. He came home with split lips and a blackened eye. He never told the truth to anyone except Eleven

over the radio. He wasn't ashamed to say these things to her. *'Friends don't lie.'* But only after a day Troy had started avoiding him, and never laid hands on him ever again. But Mike still wasn't convinced that Hopper gave a damn, he probably arranged it to ensure Eleven didn't come running to protect Mike.

"Mike is crying. I NEED TO SEE HIM." She shouted at Hopper.

Hopper sighed, "El. He cannot always depend on you to save him. He needs to learn to fight his own battles. Don't worry, I'll look after him."

Mike looked down as he felt terrible shame creeping inside him. He berated himself silently, *'You weak ass piece of shit.'*

Hopper sighed again, "Okay kid, take the TV to your room and visit him. But no talking okay? Max ten mins? Are we clear?"

'Yes,' Eleven felt ecstatic. *'God damn this split personality,'* Mike cursed under his breath as he was pulled away from the sweet comforts of the vision into the terrible darkness without an end in sight.

At that same moment in the real world, in a city situated a long distance from the town of Hawkins, a woman was briskly walking down the street towards her home. She had a strange feeling at work and taken the night off to reach her home as quickly as possible. She arrived at the door to her house after a few minutes and opened the lock with shaky hands. Then she went inside, closed the door behind her and turned the latch to secure it. A few seconds later she entered a room and shrieked as she saw her sister sitting on a chair like a sculpture made of stone. It was not an unusual phenomenon, almost a decade earlier Terry Ives had lost her sanity and dexterity to Fate. So her strange appearance should not have unsettled her sister, Becky Ives, at the least. But what shook Becky to the core was the streaks of tear that kept running down from her paralyzed sister's eyes. It was an incredible display, ever since Teresa suffered a stroke and became paralyzed, no one had ever seen her eyes twitching, let alone crying. Becky ran to her sister, held onto her shoulders and shouted, "Terry? What's wrong? Terry? Can you hear me?"

There was no response but drops of tear kept falling down her eyes in a constant stream. It spoke volumes. Becky felt a sudden knot in her stomach, what if something had happened to Jane? She knew about her strange abilities, and she was afraid of her niece. That girl was the only family they had and losing her was probably the single event that could have sparked a response like that in Teresa, Jane's mother. Teresa ran to the telephone and dialed a number from memory. The call was never answered.

In the field of lost echoes, Mike was looking for other good memories when suddenly he saw a bright firefly. It was the brightest he had ever seen in this void. It glowed like the sun and nearly blinded him. He reached out and caught it in his palm. He was excited. Which one was this? The kiss? The make-up session? That must've been good. No one had ever told Eleven that she was pretty before Mike randomly blurted it out one day. He gave in and was thrust into the tunnel.

Mike suddenly felt a terrible pain radiating throughout his entire body. His heart was pounding as if it tried desperately to send blood to his brain which was tearing away in agony. He gasped and wanted to scream his lungs out, but his jaws didn't move an inch. He opened his eyes with great difficulty and found himself looking at a glaring light. A face was speaking to him with a compassionate voice, "We'll go to the Snowball together... You can come live with us... My mom will make food for you..."

Something rattled his core as Mike looked at himself delivering a eulogy.

'FUCK!'

As the doppelganger kept speaking, Mike could only utter one word. "Promise?"

With *her* hand held in a resolute grip, the doppelganger replied, "Promise."

The perspective switched in an instant. Mike got pulled into the persona he knew like the back of his hand, and the world turned upside down.

Eleven knew right then that she had gotten everything she had ever wanted in her life, everything. Well maybe not everything, she was starving, perhaps she could get an Eggo? Eggos were excellent, so tasty. She was so hungry. But there was no time to eat because it was time to save Mike one last time. She apprehended her fate at the exact moment Mike made the promise to take her to the Snowball. Eleven was never destined to be happy, and the Snowball would have definitely been the brightest moment she would have ever experienced in her life.

'Sorry, Mike. I'm so sorry, but I won't be able to go to the snowball with you. Do you Ummm... have an Eggo? Okay, if you have one, I'll only take half, you can take the other half,' the thoughts spread through Mike's consciousness like ripples on a surface of the water. He could clearly hear Eleven and her last words that she could not articulate on that ominous night. The jumbled thoughts raced through Mike's mind; Eleven felt so hungry that she could have probably given away everything for an Eggo. *'Everything except Mike.'* Dustin might be hungry too. She didn't like Lucas that much, but she'll give him a piece, a small portion because Mike liked him. He was Mike's friend, and that meant he was also her friend. Eleven tried to focus her eyes on Mike, but his face was getting blurred. He kept staring at the ceiling and heard the guns outside die down one by one.

Joyce looked worried as she kept rubbing Mike's face with water.

"I don't get it. If he's simply passed out, he should've been up by now" Joyce spoke in a somber voice.

Nancy was looking gravely worried now. Even Jim tilted his hat to look at them. The face beneath it belonged to a man who was, at the very moment, enjoying a guided tour into his special personal hell. Dustin was outside the room crying silently while Lucas and Max stood nearby, their faces shadowed by a dark mask impossible to decipher.

A few miles from the cabin, in a rundown motel, the telephone started ringing and woke the receptionist. A few minutes later the guest came down to answer the call. The man with a faceful of black beard picked the receiver up and pressed it against his ear. A calm

voice echoed from the aether, "Murray Bauman?"

"Yes. Who's this?"

"That's irrelevant. I am calling from Hawkins National Lab."

Murray hissed through the mouthpiece, "And what can I do for you? Kidnap some children?"

The voice replied calmly, "Murray Bauman, aka Michael Brown. The relentless hound who went after a prey too difficult to find and lost everything."

The earth started shaking under Murray's feet as he bent over the counter and roared through the handset, "YOU BASTARD. You're working with him? I'LL DRAG YOU TO HELL..."

The voice of steel replied, "There's no time for your games Mr. Bauman. The world is about to end, and I am on your side."

"WHAT? But he's..."

"He's not dead. He has finally executed his trump card."

Murray snickered, "Huh. And you want me to find him for you?"

"No. I don't want you to find him."

The voice paused and continued, "I want you to find Jim Hopper for me. Right now."

Murray let out a small sigh, "And why would I do that for you?"

"Because three years back I returned Lisa to this world. I took away her nightmares and gave her a life that you always dreamt of."

Murray clutched the receiver and spoke breathlessly, "You? But you... How can I be sure?"

"Sixteenth November 1982. It was the last session when her curse was finally lifted. It was the first night she could sleep for more than three hours."

Murray breathed a sigh of relief and spoke earnestly, "Thank you for everything Doc. I am so grateful..."

The voice interjected, "No time Murray. Where's Jim?"

"I am sure you know where he lives. But he also has a cabin in the woods."

The voice spoke excitedly, "Get into your car, come to the lab and pick me up. I have something that needs to be delivered to Jim right now."

Murray ran towards the door leaving behind a bewildered receptionist who went back to sleep promptly.

At that very moment, in a city far from Hawkins, Becky Ives was walking in circles inside her room. She had no idea what to do or whom to call for help. It was evident that her niece was in trouble, but the policeman wasn't picking up the phone either. Of course, she could just drive to Hawkins and make a ruckus at the local police station to find that idiot, but she couldn't leave Terry alone in the house, crying all by herself. Suddenly the doorbell rang and startled her. Without thinking, she ran to the door and opened it in an instant and gave a muffled cry as she noticed the strange looking girl standing in front of her door.

"Who are you?"

The girl replied in a British accent, "I am Kali. Jane's friend."

Becky felt the knot tightening inside her stomach. She knew that Jane left her house to find Kali, but she was alone now. Has something really happened to Jane? Becky prayed as she addressed the newcomer in a shaky voice, "Is she alright? Tell me, please."

Kali replied in a soft tone, "I don't know. She returned to her friends tonight. I came here to meet her mother. She wanted her daughter to find me. I want to know why?"

Becky sighed, "You won't get any words out of her. She can't speak since she had the stroke."

"I know. But I want to see her. Please."

The girl did resemble the photo in the album that Becky had found today. She held the door open as Kali entered the home gently. Before closing the door, Becky noticed the four unusual forms standing at different corners of the street. Before she could speak, Kali raised her voice, "Guys. Keep watch. The attack could come from any direction."

Four indistinct voices affirmed the order and disappeared in the shadows as Kali smiled at Becky, "They are my friends. Mine and Jane's. They will keep watch tonight."

"Watch out for what?"

Kali entered the room where Terry sat and declaimed vehemently, "The man who did this to her."

Then she left a confused Becky Ives and moved to where Terry was sitting. Kali wrapped her arms around Terry and assured her, "Everything will be alright. Jane will make it through, she always has, and she always will. She will save us one day."

Then she wiped the drops of tears from Terry's face and sat down at her feet and tightly clasped her hand in her own.

Little did Kali know that her faith had already been shattered by a swift strike by Fate itself only a few hours ago. Now, it was one the verge of consuming the soul of Mike Wheeler, the boy who had stopped believing in fairy tales. Two personas struggled to take control of his mind inside that endless vision of Eleven's tragedy; *Mike, no, Eleven, no it's Mike, no...*

'NO,' Mike screamed inside his subconscious. He didn't give a fuck anymore. He was Eleven, and he embraced the fact. He needed to see it, he needed to live through it even if it annihilated his heart to go through the next moments.

Eleven looked at Mike keenly and kept uttering a lot of words inside her head. But she couldn't pronounce them as she didn't know those

words. Papa never taught her so many words. She desperately wanted to tell Mike what she was thinking about him before she would be gone forever. But she couldn't, and tears streaked down her cheek as she kept staring at the face of the boy who had cared for her, who had given her a shelter, who had given her food, who believed in her when no one else did, and who said she was *'Pretty.'* She was helpless, and she could only cry.

'But I can,' Mike lend his voice to Eleven.

"Mike, I really like that funny looking chair, if... if I go live with you can I sleep on it?"

"And the toy you showed me? That looked like a lizard that made that strange sound. Can I keep it when I'm alone in the tent?"

"Oh, the tent, I really wish to stay there, can I stay there? I promise I'll never go out, will...will you still bring me Eggs?"

"Mike, will... will you come to stay with me in the tent? I feel so scared sometimes, I'm afraid Mike, if I'm not with you, Papa would hurt you."

"Do you think I'm still pretty Mike? I'm sorry about losing the hair, but once it grows long like yours, then I'll be pretty again."

"That box in Nancy's room that played music? That reminds me of Mama. No no no, you don't have to give it to me."

"And that thing you did back there, in the Gym, just before the bad men came, will you do it again? I don't know why, but it felt different, I felt happy."

Mike listened in awe as he started to realize what Eleven tried so hard to tell him. He began to feel what Mike Wheeler, an ordinary boy from Hawkins, Indiana, genuinely meant to Eleven, a girl with supernatural powers. Words came rushing out as it found an outlet, she could finally let Mike know what she felt. Eleven felt satisfied now. She tried to smile at Mike, *'I'll go away now, Mike.'*

Mike screamed in a panic because he knew what is going to happen next. He shouted the warning aloud to warn all of them, but none

reached to his doppelganger and his friends.

"Run," he kept screaming, "Run, go, get out now."

But different words came into his mind. He was living Eleven's last moments, and he wasn't allowed to interfere.

The last words echoed through the surface; "I'm sorry Mike, but you won't be able to keep your Promise, I won't be there anymore, for the Snowball."

"You said you'll go with someone you liked, but not as a friend."

"Am I your friend Mike?"

"Will you go with someone else?"

Mike felt a searing rod entering his heart, and he felt the pain that followed. It was better not knowing what she was feeling at that moment. He knew, he always knew, but refused to acknowledge the truth; *'Eleven, an angel from Heaven, had loved Mike Wheeler, the biggest loser in Hawkins middle school, like no one, ever had and no one ever will. Mike need not have worried, Eleven would have definitely gone to Snowball with him, this year and the lifetime that followed.'*

The tape recorder played through the last words as it slowed down; "Mike it hurts. It hurts so much. But you're okay, the bad men are gone, they cannot hurt you anymore."

"Will you smile for me? Why are you crying?"

"Runaway Mike, everyone please run away."

"Lucas, Dustin. Please take care of Mike when I'm gone."

Mike wanted to shut his mouth now. He couldn't continue listening to this recording anymore. It was crushing his soul in a firm grip. Then he uttered the last words that Eleven thought of while she laid on the table, "Mike, will you touch your face with me one more time? It felt so different. I don't know what it means. Just one more time?"

'Mike Wheeler will never kiss another girl again as long as he lived,' he

made a promise to himself. Tears came crashing down his face as he kept begging his doppelganger to kiss the girl who was going to go away forever.

Suddenly there was a loud crash at the door. Eleven didn't need to see because she already knew. Papa had come back to take away everything she had cared about, *'He's here to take away Mike.'*

The boys frantically tried to shield Eleven from the horror that was slowly advancing towards them. Eleven didn't see the demo-gorgon, she noticed Papa, and instantly Mike knew what she had to do. With the last fragment of her strength, she rose up and climbed out of the table. Mike was standing in front of her at only an arm's length away. She wanted to hug him one last time, but time, there was no time. She didn't know how long she could endure; her head was splitting apart with the pain. Lucas launched a rock at the monster, it was fruitless until it wasn't. Eleven pushed it with all her strength and pinned the beast to the wall. Then she started marching towards her Fate.

Pain, hunger, tiredness, Mike didn't feel anything anymore. He felt sadness for a life which will never be, for a flower that will never blossom, for an Eggo that will never be eaten, for a dinner that will never take place, for a Millennium Falcon that will never do fly, for a D&D game which will never have its mage, for a child who will never get to grow up, for a girl who will never become pretty.

'For a promise that will never be kept.'

He couldn't see anything because her vision was becoming clouded. She barely held on but kept moving forward with a slow and steady pace. Eleven was determined to end this... and save Mike. Mike came running to rescue her, she tried to smile at his courage, but her face didn't work correctly, *'so much pain.'*

She knew what he was prepared to do. *'No, Mike,'* She flung him back with a push from her mind. She winced as Mike crashed against the wall, she wanted to help him but she couldn't. He laid there stunned, too shocked to react.

Eleven reached the monster and slowly raised her head. It knew what

she wanted, and she knew what it wanted. It was possible to fulfill both their desires, but she needed to go away alongside it. The monster wanted to steal away her happiness, it tried to take away Mike Wheeler from her. Papa didn't like her to be happy because it made her weak. But she knew that at that very moment, she was the happiest person alive, and she was far stronger than she ever was.

She turned her head towards Mike. He was still lying against the wall where she had thrown him. She couldn't discern his face anymore. Her vision was slowly fading away as blood pooled around her eyes. But then she saw him, one last time. Mike was safe. And that's all she wanted.

"Goodbye... Mike,"

'I'll never forget you.'

She was happy because she'll never forget him now. Then she looked back at the monster and raised her arm.

"NO MORE."

A/N: This chapter was extremely difficult to write. Moreover I played the 'Terminator 2 Judgement Day - It's Over' soundtrack alongside it and got swept away by emotions. Hope I had managed to transmit some of those emotions to my readers as well.

Next up is the final chapter, titled- Phoenix.

6. Phoenix

Act VI - Phoenix

"Careful Doc, this way," Murray Bauman spoke as he gently helped the old man to climb inside the car and closed the door. Then he ran to the driver's side and took the seat.

"I suppose you won't tell me what's really going on?" Murray sighed as he keyed the ignition and pressed the gas.

Dr. Sam Owens shook his head sideways and replied, "The less you know for now, the better, Mr. Bauman. This is not your battle to fight... Not yet."

"But why are we trying to find Jim Hopper?"

Dr. Owens smiled absently, "To save a child from her Fate."

He paused for a second to check the glass vial kept inside his jacket and continued, "A Fate orchestrated by none other than the man who had stolen your identity."

Murray swerved the car on to the road and pressed the gas as hard as he could. The modified V6 engines of the Chevy Chevelle roared to life as the speedometer made a dash towards the right. Murray hardened his jaw as he remembered the stage where a man had taken his last oath, *'We might be gone, but someone will take our place. YOU CAN NOT RUN FROM JUSTICE.'*

"And you won't. Murray Bauman will see to that," Murray uttered inaudibly and raced his chariot through the night in search of his prey.

At that exact moment, inside a theatre where the greatest tragedy of the world was just reenacted, a boy was lost inside his sorrow. Mike Wheeler felt sad and confused because he was simultaneously a spectator and an actor in that tragic saga and he couldn't do anything to change the course of history. He sat there, not knowing what time

it was, where he was or who he really was at that moment. Thousands of magical Fireflies pulsed all around him as if he was somehow drawing them towards his soul. Tears rained down his cheeks and vanished in the shade below.

"Oh, El. I felt so angry when you told me that you listened but didn't say anything for three hundred and fifty-three days. I didn't know, I'm so sorry. You sacrificed so much, for me, and I..." He choked up.

Tears welled up inside him, and he let them flow without restraint. Mike was helpless, but he was furious. He beat the ground in front of him with his small hands and the water splashed everywhere. He was going to break his arm, but it didn't matter. He was back to square one because Eleven was gone, and he couldn't do anything to bring her back.

"Why did you show me these memories? Are they Eleven's, or are they mine? Did she really feel this way?" Mike yelled at the raging darkness around him.

He shouted his frustration at the invisible audience, "Or are they what I wish El felt about me? Are they even real?"

Mike kept crying as his resolve shattered at the thoughts of the questions that would never be answered because there was no one left to answer them anymore.

"I could not take her to the Snowball. I failed her, and no matter what you show me, that's the truth," Mike sobbed quietly at his failure as the silence started swallowing his voice. The Fireflies began fading away into the night as the lights winked out one by one, heralding the end of an era of light and promises.

Back in the world where hope still walked under the stars, Ted Wheeler raced through the contents of an old chest furiously as the feeling of impending doom settled down inside his stomach. Time was running out, he felt the turmoil inside his soul, but he had no clue for what. He only knew that he needed to find the flower vase as soon as possible before something terrible happened to his son.

"GOD DAMN IT. Where is the fucking vase?" Ted yelled his frustration out as he slammed the lid of the old chest his father had left him.

Then he turned around and almost fell back onto the ground. Karen, his wife, was standing right behind him with two strange looking objects in her hands. Each of the semi-cylindrical articles had a smooth contour on one side and a jagged edge on the other side.

"THE VASE," Ted shouted and ran to his wife but froze as his eyes fell on her face. Karen was crying silently as she held the remnants of a broken promise in her hands.

She spoke quietly, "I am sorry Ted. I did this, I broke it."

A lifetime ago, after encountering the most terrible revelation in her life, Karen couldn't take the misery anymore and broke the flower vase into pieces. But Ted wasn't ready to surrender to the pain and spent the following year to assemble the flower vase together with glue. It was a meticulous endeavor because the artifact was shattered into hundreds of pieces, but Ted was tenacious. And now it seemed, that the bonds had become loose and the flower vase was split from the middle. Ted gently took the pieces from his wife's hands and set them on the bed. Then he hugged Karen and spoke softly, "No. The promise was never ours to keep anyway."

Karen glanced at her husband with a confused stare and asked, "Not ours? Then whose to keep?"

"Mike. I don't know how I know, but I felt it today. This was always his promise to keep Karen, he was there when we swore it."

Karen held onto her husband and inquired, "What should we do Ted?"

Ted gently removed his wife's hands from his neck and moved to the bed. He picked the two pieces up and turned the bottom surfaces towards the light. The vase had been split from the middle, and each side contained a pair of words that were destined to be together.

"Karen? Get the glue," Ted knew what they had to do.

"Can I get you anything?" Becky asked the girl who was squatting at Terry's feet and murmuring something to her.

"No. Thank you. But my friends are out there. They might need something," Kali responded without looking up.

Becky smiled at the young girl, "Oh. I already gave them some cookies and coffee."

She had met one of the members of the band some time ago. The big man had introduced himself as Funshine, a name which made Becky smirk even though she was terrified inside. Over the next ten minutes of conversation, she came to realize that Funshine was nothing but a big fluffy bear; hard on the outside but soft and caring on the inside. He was afraid of Jane's Fate just like the rest of his gang members were and had sworn to protect her mother, Terry, at all costs. Becky had started approving this ragtag gang of unsightly people, who were Jane's friends. She moved to her sister and stared at the expressionless face, tears kept streaking down Terry's cheek and wetting her gown.

The girl named Kali suddenly stood up, looked at Becky and spoke calmly, "She can't hear me, can she?"

Becky shook her head sideways and replied, "No. She can't. She can speak to Jane, but I don't think she can listen to anyone else."

Kali was lost in thought for a few seconds, then she addressed the sisters with resolve, "But she can see."

Becky was confused at the words, "I'm not sure if she can comprehend what she is seeing."

Kali took Becky's hand in her own and asked her to sit down beside them. Once Becky took her seat, Kali raised her head and spoke to the unknown, "The heart can see what the eyes can not. I will show you what you need to see. I will show you Jane's resolve."

Then the world went dark around Becky's eyes.

Mike was still lost inside Eleven's memories in the field of the

fireflies. The halo was slowly disappearing as the lights went out one by one but did not pulse again. It was just like what Mike's father had told him about memories back when his grandfather had died. But unlike what his father had promised, the lights did not come back again. In his darkest hour, the memories were abandoning him one by one. He wondered what Eleven would have said if she knew about the fireflies.

Suddenly Mike gasped as he realized what he was really witnessing. He also remembered the strange sensation that he had felt when he arrived here; like an invisible hand was burrowing inside his soul to look for something. What did it find? Who did that hand belong to? Is it possible? The thought sent a ripple down his spine. Swiftly he looked at the void and shouted, "El? You promised that I won't ever lose you again. Then why are you leaving me?"

There was no response. Mike wasn't ready to surrender just yet. He thought for a second and shouted at the fireflies, "You think you can escape by not answering my question?"

Mike hardened his jaw and spoke with resolve, "I have waited three hundred and fifty-three days for her. I have called out to her, every night... every single night, at the exact same time, over and over again. And I will wait another three thousand years if I have to. **BUT I WILL HAVE MY ANSWER.**"

"Eleven?" Mike begged the void for a reply.

"Mike. Please forgive me," an ethereal voice gently whispered an apology as the last remnants of the fireflies pulsed weakly one last time. Although the voice was severely distorted, Mike could have recognized it anywhere in this world.

"No," Mike shouted to the concealed whisperer. "I won't. You want my forgiveness? **THEN COME BACK AND TELL ME IN MY FACE WHY YOU ARE SORRY.**"

There was no response, but Mike was no longer worried. He breathed a sigh of relief as he finally became convinced that Eleven was alive. Mike had no clue where he was, but he was with the girl he had lost once, and he was not going to lose her again. The fireflies were

fragments of her memories, and as long as they pulsed in this vast ocean of aether, Eleven still clung on to life in the physical realm. But time was running out. Mike could feel the darkness slowly collapsing around him as the fireflies kept fading into oblivion.

"She's going away. I must save her. How?" Mike conversed absentmindedly with himself. He tried remembering the stories his father had narrated to him during childhood. Ted appeared cold and isolated to everyone else, but deep inside, Mike knew what that man embodied. The sum of all the knowledge and wisdom that his father had bestowed upon him when he was a kid could have outweighed any prize that this world might have offered him. But which story would give him the answer tonight?

Abruptly Mike remembered an old quote his father had recited to him when he was little, "Man cannot live without some knowledge of the purpose of life. If he can find no purpose in life, he creates one in the inevitability of death."

The lines knocked the air straight out Mike's chest, and he gasped audibly for breath. The reason Eleven was no longer fighting to survive because she had lost her purpose in life, whatever it might have been. Now, Mike needed to return that purpose to her, or give her a new one that would burn brightly inside her heart forever. Mike felt like a dungeon master once again, and he needed a strategy. Eleven had not departed from this earth. For some reason, she had fought death to bestow upon Mike her memories. But now that her subconscious had served that purpose, she was going to go away.

'*What was her purpose?*' Mike thought and realized that he required more knowledge, he needed to grasp why Eleven cared so much about him. Why would a mysterious girl with divine powers feel so much for a boy who couldn't even win a single fight in school? Why did she care so much to show him her memories before dying? What was she trying to tell him? What was she feeling sorry for? The fireflies were dancing around him and slowly kept disappearing into the background. He could still reach out to them and witness more visions until he found the answer. But some of the memories were too dreadful, and a lifetime of them was flying around him.

'*Thirteen years of living in a nightmare,*' Mike swallowed at the thought

of the never-ending horror. Then he remembered a commitment made by a mortal to a goddess and swore an oath, "I'll protect her even at the cost of my sanity."

Mike Wheeler had rediscovered his faith in Promises once again, and this time even Fate could not hinder him. He stood up straight, the same way he had stood up in front of Troy back in the gym, the same way he had stood up to his friends who had doubted Eleven, the same way he had stood up to Martin Brenner when he tried to take her away back in the corridor.

'The same way Heroes have stood up to Fate from time immemorial,' Ted's voice rippled through the blackness as Mike spread out his arms and embraced his Destiny. The fireflies pulsed around him once and soared towards his body. In a moment, Mike's soul was shattered into countless pieces as the fireflies brought forth the memories of Eleven in all their glory. He could only scream as he was thrust into Tunnels after Tunnels, Memories after Memories, Visions after Visions.

A mirror was shattered into infinite fragments as the light from uncountable memories reflected off them and pierced the darkness with blinding radiation.

In a moment Mike was everywhere across every moment in Eleven's life. He recalled memories that even Eleven had forgotten. Mike witnessed everything that Eleven had ever seen, he felt everything she had ever felt, he laughed every time she had laughed, he cried every time she had ever cried. Mike Wheeler was with Eleven at every step of her life, watching over her and testifying her past to her present. And then he returned to the void as the fireflies slowly kept fading into the darkness once and for all.

Mike bent forward and crashed into the ground. It was too much, and his head was splitting apart from the overload of information. He pressed his palms against his ears and screamed in agony. Somewhere far away, the hands of a clock started moving towards the infinity, *'Tick-Tock, Tick-Tock.'* Mike's heartbeat synced with the clock as it counted towards the point of no return. It was slowly actuating towards the time when Eleven would be gone forever. *'Shit,'* Mike fought through the pain and stood up. His legs kept shaking, and the world kept swirling in front of his eyes. But he had to fight

the pain to save her because he had sworn an oath.

"There's Dustin, Lucas, and Will. And Steve, and Nancy and Hopper. Oh, Joyce and Jonathan. I love them all," Jane spoke excitedly at Kali on the rooftop of an apartment somewhere in a big city.

Becky stared at the scene with a slack jaw and wide eyes. She couldn't believe what she was seeing right in front of her eyes. It was like watching a movie from inside the TV. The images were not real of course, as she had found out a few minutes earlier. There were two Kalis in that vision, one held on to Terry and Becky's hands as drops of blood trickled down from her nostril. Another one, the ethereal figure, kept conversing with Jane on the rooftop.

The image spoke to Jane, "You have so many friends. And you found them all in such a short time?"

Jane replied in an instant, "Oh no. I didn't become friends with all of them in the beginning. My first friend was... Mike."

"Mike?" Kali made a curious expression on her face as she noticed the shift in Jane's tone as she uttered that name.

Jane started stuttering, "Well... He is this boy I saw... I mean found... No, he found me."

Kali started laughing as she slapped Jane's shoulder, "You like this boy? Mike?"

"No. I mean yes. He gave me his jacket."

"And that's why you like him?"

Jane was almost blushing now. She spoke the next words in a hurry, "No. He also gave me eggos, and he gave me his watch. He also said I am Pretty."

"He did? How kind of him to give you so many gifts. But tell me, what did you give him?" Kali was clearly teasing Jane now. But the oblivious girl didn't catch the hint. She kept trying to find words to describe Mike as the images slowly started fading in the background.

A few seconds later, Becky found herself sitting inside her apartment along with her two companions. Kali let go of their hands and fell back on the ground with a loud groan. Becky stood up to help the girl, but she got up a second later and spoke with a tired voice, "I have to use a lot of my stamina to make these memories as real as possible for her. I will be alright, I just need to show her one more vision."

Back in the Wheeler residence, the stressed couple was working against the clock to put the broken flower vase together. Karen carefully placed a layer of gum along the broken edges of the two pieces of the artifact and Ted gently placed one on top of the other. Then he carefully pressed them together and forged the bond. Four words at the bottom of the vase were again united as Ted triumphantly smiled at his wife who grinned back at him in response. Then the smiles were wiped from the face as all the lights in the house started flickering all at once. It looked like a normal voltage fluctuation, but the couple knew better. They could feel the calm before the storm earlier, but now, it felt as if the sky was about to crash into Hawkins. Ted held Karen close in arms as she clutched the Flower vase to her chest. They had realized that there was no escaping the storm. Through their windows, they could clearly see the outside where the streetlights and even the lights inside their neighbors' homes started flickering rapidly.

A few miles from the cabin, the headlamps of a Chevy Chevelle which was racing through the night, started to flicker as well. Murray instinctively went for the brake, but before he could stop the car, his passenger yelled, "DRIVE! MR. BAUMAN."

Murray released the paddle and pressed the accelerator as the car lurched forward with a sudden burst of speed. He got the car under control and spoke breathlessly, "What's happening Doc?"

Dr. Sam Owens clutched his hands together and whispered, "Destiny is about to challenge Fate."

A/N: I was planning to end the story in this chapter but it became too long, so I had to split it in two. The next chapter will be up

tomorrow at the same time and conclude the story; the saga of Mike's Destiny vs Eleven's Fate; Fireflies.

Please let me know what you think about this chapter. This is slightly fast paced and going forward my next works like Armageddon will also pick up speed.

PS: One of my readers pm'ed to ask me if there is any source from which I draw inspiration when writing.

Apart from my rather eccentric thought process, I draw inspiration from music. I listen to various types of songs and soundtracks and when I feel that they are driving me towards a specific type of emotion, I save them in one of my mood based playlists. For this particular chapter; I listened to - 'Iridescent Collision by Bryan Nguyen' (soundtrack of Bumblebee Second Trailer) a few times in loop and got to writing. The perfect sequence of hope and epic sequences helped me to imagine the scenes in my mind before I started writing them. And music is one of my key aspirations to write.

If you guys are further interested then read this chapter first and then and go listen to that soundtrack. I hope you can imagine the sequences as the music plays in the background.

7. Destiny

Act VII - Destiny

"Are you ready?" The unusual girl named Kali asked the woman sitting motionlessly in front of her. Of course, Terry Ives could not reply to that sincere query because the ability to respond to external stimuli had been taken away from her a lifetime ago by a man who walked the shadows in guise of serving the light.

Becky responded in place of her sister in a shaky voice, "We are ready."

Kali smiled and held the hands of both the sisters in her own. Then she closed her eyes as the world flickered a couple of times and Becky found herself sitting on the pavement at the corner of some obscure street in some distant city somewhere in the USA. She breathed sharply as her eyes fell upon the young girl standing at the bus stop in front of them. It was Jane, but she looked so different now. Her hair was plastered to her head with some gel, and dark eyeliners masked her beautiful eyes in a deep shadow. She wore the same outlandish clothes as Kali and her gang. But truth to be told, Becky kind of liked this look on her niece. It was the signature teenage rebel outfit, and Jane carried it with a certain elegance.

Kali chuckled softly, "Sorry for that. Thought she could use a makeover."

Becky laughed, "She looks... tough."

Kali grinned back, "Bitchin."

Before Becky could ask what it meant, a white van raced through the corner and pulled up in front of the bus stop. Jane backed up a few feet as the doors of the vans opened, and Kali jumped out and landed on the sidewalk. Then she walked to Jane slowly and spoke in a cold voice, "You think you can run away?"

The murderous intent was evident in her voice. Becky felt uncomfortable at the sight in front of her. But the Kali holding her

hand assured her with a nod.

The ethereal Kali continued berating Jane in a harsh tone, "You've betrayed your family Jane. We took you in, gave you a chance to redeem your past. And you've decided to leave us in our greatest hour of need. We've lost everything. EVERYTHING. YOU HEAR ME?"

Jane suddenly moved forward as Kali tensed up and placed a hand near her hip. But before she could pull out the gun, Jane hugged her tightly in an embrace and left the enraged girl bewildered.

"I am sorry. But I have to go back to my friends."

Kali spoke a second later, "Your friends? Who are your friends Jane? The humans who cast you out?"

Jane replied softly, "No. Those who took me in. I have to go back to Mike."

Kali placed a hand on her sisters' shoulder and asked her, "Why Mike?"

Jane replied quietly as if she had forgotten where she was standing, "Because he gave me his word, Kali. He promised me that he would take me to Snowball. I have to go back to Mike Wheeler, so he can keep his promise."

Becky suddenly remembered a strange looking flower vase that her sister had carried home thirteen years ago. Could that Promise still hold meaning after so many years? It was an impossible notion, but then she was sitting inside the dreams of a Psychic girl, the boundaries of possibilities were no longer defined in human terms.

The ethereal Kali was curious, she asked, "What's so important about a promise?"

"Promises are the only things human have. If Mike loses that, he will lose everything. AND THAT'S WORSE THAN DEATH."

Jane's scream shocked Becky to her core as tears came to her eyes. She wondered if that was the reason for which Terry was crying now. Did Mike Wheeler break his promise? No. Did the Wheelers break

their promise to Terry Ives? The images kept moving in front of her eyes.

Kali was clearly taken aback by that response. She waited for a few seconds and then ran her hand inside the pocket and took out some dollar bills. She smiled at her sister, "Here's your share of the loot."

"Kali..."

Kali shook her head and affirmed her sister, "It's okay Jane. It's time for you to return to your home."

Jane hugged her sister tightly and asked, "Why don't you come with me? Hopper will take the care of you all."

"No, Jane. There's something I need to do. I can't go with you right now."

She stopped to swallow her tears and continued, "Will you remember me, Jane? Will you remember your lost sister who tried to steal your innocence?"

Jane shook her head and replied, "I will never forget you, Kali. I promise that I'll come back for you along with Mike. And together, we'll save you all."

"This Mike must be helluva strong kid. I wish I could have met him," Kali gave a short laugh.

A bus slowly rolled into the stop, and the doors opened. Jane said goodbye to all her friends in tears and climbed aboard. They were feeling sad at her departure too. Funshine was almost crying like a big baby.

After the bus left, the gang huddled together near their van. Kali gave a precise set of instructions to her teammates, "It's time to ride. We need to find Terry Ives and protect her."

Axle was apparently not thrilled about the idea. He objected vehemently, "The fuck? We're on guard duty now? Who's this Terry Ives? Where do we find her?"

Kali responded as she climbed on the car, "She's Jane's mother, and I know where to find her."

"So?"

"So does Martin Brenner."

The four figures quickly climbed in the van, and it raced away into the night.

The visions faded from the background as the spectators returned to the mortal realm. Kali bent over with a groan and fell down on the floor. Becky moved over to the stressed girl and helped her to sit up. Then she wiped the droplet of blood above Kali's lips and smiled at her, "You showed me everything I needed to see. And her too."

Becky pointed at her sister as Kali looked up and gasped when her eyes fell on the face of the woman bound to the chair in front of them by her Fate. Terry was no longer crying, but her eyes burned with a strange fury that only a few people in the world could have comprehended. Kali started laughing as Becky joined her. But then the lights inside the house started flickering in a slow but steady rhythm and left the occupants alarmed.

Becky was about to rise up, but Kali stopped her and spoke with resolution, "Believe!"

"What?"

Kali whispered, "Mike Wheeler's promise is yet to be broken."

In a battlefield where Destiny dueled with Fate, Mike kept trying desperately to find a weapon before Fate destroyed his only ally, and then vanquished his only friend forever. He felt the strange sensation as the fragments of his soul slowly started assimilating together after being shattered into infinite pieces a moment ago. Mike needed to understand why Eleven came back to him and showed him her memories. Did he have the answer? His mind was foggy because he had just lived Eleven's entire lifetime in a fraction of a nanosecond and the information was too much to handle at once. But then a

spark went off inside his mind and opened a locked door, one amongst the countless of them.

"Hopper, did you ever break a promise?" Eleven put the last piece of Eggo in her mouth and spoke with a mouthful.

"Huh? What?" Hopper stopped the spoon inches away from his lips. He was apparently not equipped to handle philosophical questions at the dinner table.

"Did you ever promise something to someone and then not keep it?" Eleven was looking at Hopper with a curious gaze.

"Uh... Yes. I had broken my promise to someone very close to me," Hopper replied in a sad voice as he dropped the spoon on the table.

"Then what happened?"

Hopper sighed, "I nearly lost my mind. I kept trying to find that person to beg her for forgiveness. But she was long gone. One day I came home from the station and decided to go meet that person."

"How? She was gone." Eleven felt stupid, but she had to ask.

"I know where she had gone." Hopper's voice could have sliced through metal.

"Where did she go?"

"To a better place." Hopper's eyes reflected the light coming from the table lamp as he removed the lock from a memory long buried inside his heart.

"Did you see her?"

"I was going to meet her. I had everything I needed to make the journey," he finished the sentence and turned his head towards the gun that was lying on the couch.

"Did you go?"

Hopper smiled, "No. Someone found me and hauled me back from

that path."

"Who?"

"The most courageous woman I have ever met."

"Who?"

Hopper sighed, "I'll tell you the story someday."

"So, breaking promises is bad?"

Hopper smiled, "Never break a promise that you have made to a person you love."

He finally realized where the conversation came from and where it was heading. Mike Wheeler was the boy who had taught Eleven the value of a promise, and for that very reason, Hopper really felt gratified to him. But Mike didn't show her the other side of the coin, and it wasn't his fault because the kid lacked experience.

Hopper leaned forward and projected the words to his daughter, "But Eleven, If someone makes a promise to you, someone who loves you, then do not allow him to break that promise. Do whatever you must to ensure that the person gets a chance to keep his promise to you."

Hopper knew about the Snowball. He also knew that Eleven would always need to protect Mike, so he could protect her from her past. Some wars could not be fought even with supernatural powers. He ran his hands through his daughter's hair and spoke firmly, "Promises are all we humans have El. In our darkest nights, they shine like the north star to guide us to our salvation. A broken promise is worse than death to both the parties."

Eleven beamed at her father, "So I can go to the Snowball with Mike?"

Hopper dipped the spoon in the bowl and conversed in a light tone, "I was thinking we can hang some disco lights in here and..."

The memory dissolved into Mike's subconscious and he muffled a

short cry. He had unlocked the secret at last. He had discovered Eleven's purpose; *'The Promise.'* Eleven realized that she was going to die tonight. But deep inside her soul, she knew that Mike would forever wander in the void to find the answer to the question, *'Would Eleven have gone to the Snowball with me?'*

And then he would have gone insane and perished because he would never get his answer, he would not be able to keep his promise to the girl whom he loved with all his tiny heart. Of course, Eleven did not want such a tragic fate for her soulmate, so she somehow used her powers to let him know the answer; *'A thousand times Yes.'*

Mike could have asked her to come to the moon with him, and she would have agreed without even thinking. He no longer needed to keep his promise because Mike Wheeler had taken Jane Eleven Ives to the Snowball with him, in an alternate universe where Eleven's Fate had lost track of its prey.

She had served her purpose. She had saved Mike from purgatory of broken promises, and now she could finally die in peace.

'Holy fuck.'

Mike gritted his teeth in frustration. He had always known that girls were crazy. Well, Eleven was cute and fluffy, but she was basically a nincompoop because she never realized what the promise was for.

Mike wanted to be the reason for which Eleven could forget her past and live in the future. However, she needed to exist because she deserved to, even if Mike wasn't there. Eleven needed to survive because she had not yet seen even a fraction of what this world had to offer her. She shouldn't be happy with only what she had experienced because there was too much left to explore. She deserved to exist for herself, not for Mike, not for Hopper, not for Brenner.

'Mike Wheeler had promised Eleven to give her a life that she deserved. That was the oath sworn by the last paladin to the last mage on this earth,' Mike smiled absentmindedly as he realized how to save her.

It was finally time. A bell started ringing somewhere, and Mike felt the world transforming around him. It was still dark, but he knew it

was fading away to oblivion as Eleven's life-force drained away in the mortal world.

Mike shouted to the few remaining fireflies hovering about his chest, "You have not released me from my Promise, Eleven. Since I can't speak to you, let me show you the true meaning of the promise."

He closed his eyes and reached inside his own heart and looked back at his life. There was a flash of light, and then he was standing somewhere with a vibrant blue sky and a bright green sea calling out for an adventure. *'Hawaii, 1978.'* Mike's mother was chatting with Nancy while Mike was building a sandcastle with his dad. The sun shone brightly in the sky and bathed them in a warm light. *A blur of light flew through the towers of the castle made of sand.*

Ding, the gong rang far away.

Mike struck deeper to find another memory. He was at the hospital where Holly had just been born. He turned his head towards the bed and saw his mother's face. She was crying in joy. Dad was standing beside her beaming like the Sun. *A tiny point of light started blinking above Holly's face.*

The gong struck once more.

Mike walked towards the swing. It was his first day in school, and he knew no one. No one even looked at the small boy who was scared to be in such a big crowd. Then he found his way to the swing where another little kid was sitting alone. The kid looked up at Mike and flashed a cheerful smile, "Hi, I am Will." That was a friendship that went to hell, twice, but always lifted them up in the end. *Two rivers of light moved in harmony as they weaved through the chains of the swing.*

Mike looked behind again as the bell sounded, but it was closer this time.

"Hey," the weird kid called him, "Wanna play DND?" The kid had no teeth, so Troy called him toothless. He was so jovial that he never cried, never. Dustin Henderson never grieved, and he never ran away. Even in the face of impossible odds, he was always ready to fight, even if he didn't have the necessary strength to emerge triumphant every time. *A bright spear of light rose from the ground and*

disappeared into the sky.

Mike reached out again. Two cycles raced furiously through the streets of Hawkins. The riders were almost neck to neck until the very last moment when one of them pulled ahead and crossed the finish line first. Mike had always been fast with a cycle until Lucas beat him in the Mirkwood run one day. And they became best friends from that day onwards. Two streaks of light approached each other and then started racing together towards the infinity.

The bell rang, destiny arrived.

The last firefly pulsed desperately as it kept defying the all-encompassing darkness around Mike. He was running out of time. Destiny raised its sword to Fate for the last time.

Back in the cabin Mike suddenly started breathing laboriously, and his eyes began twitching behind his eyelid furiously. Steve almost jumped up as Nancy came running. She took Mike's hands, the one clutching Eleven's arm, and tried to pull it apart. It didn't budge an inch. As if the flickering lights weren't enough, now something unnatural was going on between Mike and Eleven. The occupants of the room felt a sliver of hope in their hearts. But Eleven was still lying motionless, and the shadow of death still covered her beautiful face with darkness. They were afraid of hoping for an impossibility. Eleven's death has proved to them once and for all that miracles did not happen in real life.

Deep inside his heart, Mike realized that he didn't have much time left. But he also knew what he wanted to show Eleven; not the kiss, not the reunion, not the first day, not the leap. She knew all of them. He reached into his heart for the last time as the last firefly disappeared in the background.

Mike stood in front of the school's stadium dressed in a baggy navy-blue colored sweater and blue jeans. Dustin, Will, and Lucas weren't there. In fact, all three of them had decided to skip the Snowball last year. They knew what Mike felt, and they couldn't go. Dustin even shouted at his stupid friend, "You son of a bitch, none of us are going.

Not this year. You hear me?"

Mike didn't. He reached there with the Supercom in his hand. Then he slowly started walking while hiding his face from the crowd. He saw all the couples that were going inside. They were laughing and trying to find comfort in each other's arms. He was also thrilled because he believed she would come. After all, he had made a promise, and she wouldn't let him break the commitment now, would she? He stepped into the hall where music was playing, and Mr. Clarke was serving punch. He bowed his head and went behind the staircase. It was time. He brought out the radio, switched to the predetermined channel and whispered, "El, you are out there, aren't you? I know you are, I can feel you."

"I..." He lost his voice. He wanted to cry, but he held on. He couldn't be sad today.

He proposed to the unknown, "Do you want to dance with me?"

There was only static. He moved up and found an open spot. He didn't know how to dance but still put out his arms to embrace the imaginary girl who had accompanied him that night.

"I'm going crazy, but this is the best way. Better go crazy than believe that she's gone forever," Mike muttered as he moved with the music and made a mess of his steps, but he tried. He kept at it until the music stopped. He was tired, but he didn't show it. He was happy that he could keep his promise.

Then with an unexpected blow to his chest, he realized that it didn't matter. Because he couldn't keep his true promise to Eleven. It had taken him a long time to figure out, but the promise was never about the Snowball, it wasn't about the kiss, it wasn't about the shelter, it wasn't about the Eggos, it was something entirely different. Mike Wheeler had promised to gift Eleven a life she deserved to live. She had suffered so much pain and horror in her life, that Mike was desperate to take the pain away and make her smile; *'That was the true Oath.'*

Standing inside an endless nightmare, Mike looked at the darkness above him and uttered quietly, "You have saved me Eleven. I know

that makes you happy. But did you ever think what makes me happy?"

Tears crashed down his cheeks as he continued, "The only thing that makes me happy is to see you live a life that you deserve. A life with your friends and family. A life where you don't have to hide. A life where you could walk into a room and everyone would lose their mind over how pretty you are. A life where the world recognized you for who you are. Please come back so I can help you live the life you deserve."

"Come back and let me keep my promise. Please," Mike uttered his final request and collapsed into the darkness. The void was nearly gone now, and eternal darkness swallowed the young boy who had defied the inevitable until the last breath.

Suddenly a bright glow appeared around Mike as thousands of fireflies pulsed a pure white light and descended on his body. The darkness recoiled from the iridescent points of light and retreated beyond the veil. But Mike could not witness his salvation because he had already passed out.

Back in the room, Nancy tried dragging Mike's hands away from Eleven's, but it proved futile. In fact, he was pretty much immovable. Suddenly the lamps around them flared up all at once, and the air started becoming heavier. Hopper jumped up and reached for his gun.

"What the fuck?" Joyce gave a faint scream and fell backward. Jonathan ran towards Nancy and pulled her away just as Steve was suddenly thrown back by an invisible force, but Mike didn't fall on the ground. He was suspended in the air like magic. The lamps started to build intensity until they began to burn like the Supernovae and nearly blinded the occupants of the room. The kids standing outside weren't affected by the initial burst of radiation, but they regarded it a second later when the forest in front of them was illuminated by the glow shining through the windows. Dustin's jaw dropped as if he had seen a ghost while Lucas gulped and grabbed Max's arm. And then the three of them covered their eyes and entered the room together.

The fire department in a city far away from Hawkins was suddenly woken up by a frantic call from a concerned citizen. The caller informed the station about a blazing inferno that was on the verge of consuming a small home somewhere in the suburbs. The caller kept shouting hysterically through the receiver, "It's burning like the Sun."

"Excuse me, ma'am? But where is the fire exactly?"

"Right next door. I have never seen anything like this."

"What are you seeing ma'am? Is there smoke? Do you see any people in the house?"

"I CAN'T SEE SHIT. It's like the Sun has risen inside their house. Dear lord, someone save the Ives."

"We are on our way ma'am. Please move away from your window."

Back in Hawkins, somewhere on a track hidden inside the woods, a car screeched to a halt as the headlights flared like the twin rays of a newborn star. Murray shouted to his passenger, "Is this Destiny too? Fuck, even the speedometer. What the fuck is going on Doc?"

Dr. Sam Owens started laughing hysterically, "It's over. He did it. The boy's destiny has defeated her fate."

"Which boy?" Murray was thinking about the poltergeist in the woods.

Dr. Sam Owens was still grinning as he uttered the name. Murray's eyebrows rose, "That scrawny kid?"

"Physical strength has nothing to do with your resolve. What do you know about the sheath?"

Murray sighed, "Will Lisa be alright if I leave you in the woods right now?"

Dr. Sam Owens forcefully ceased his laughter when the severe pain radiating from his leg reminded him of his mortality. He spoke to his

driver, "We don't need to find Hopper tonight anymore. My patient has been saved. Turn around and get me to the hospital."

"But what about..."

"I am bleeding like a half-butchered pig, Mr. Bauman. I promise you that Hopper won't take it kindly when he discovers my dead body inside your car."

Murray switched the lights off and turned the car around and started driving it slowly towards the highway. He had to rely on the moonlight to navigate through the woods. A few seconds later he asked his passenger, "What were you saying about the sheath?"

Dr. Sam Owens was tired beyond belief, but he decided to entertain his driver for the time being, "The sword is a magnificent weapon but..."

The growls of a restrained V6 engine slowly faded into the darkness. The passengers did not notice the faint glow that was visible from the top of the woods behind them. But they did see the strange glow that set the sky in front of them on fire. It's as if the entire town of Hawkins was set ablaze by some barbarians.

Inside the Wheeler residence, among the burning rays of lamps possessed by strange spirits, Ted Wheeler held his wife to his chest as the light threatened to blind them. Karen shouted at her husband, "Ted. What's happening?"

Ted spoke feverishly, "I don't know. But I'm having a good feeling about this."

"What's so good about the Sun shining inside your house? It's going to start a fire," Karen shouted over the loud buzzing noise produced by the lamps.

"Hold onto that vase tightly dear. This will be over soon, and we'll be okay. All of us will be okay," Ted kept smiling for some odd reason.

Inside Hopper's cabin, Dustin, Lucas, and Max entered the room with

their eyes covered with their arms. The lights were so bright the radiation would have burned through their eyelids if they removed their hands.

However, the light slowly died down, and the lamps returned to their usual intensity after a minute. Once the afterimages produced by the light faded away, they observed Mike floating in the air just above Eleven's body with his face facing hers. Eleven did not look so pale anymore, and her eyes twitched behind her eyelids. Then suddenly her chest moved as if she was trying to breathe. The kids jumped in joy and ran toward the couch. Slowly Mike's face started moving towards Eleven's, and they touched their foreheads together.

Mike opened his eyes to light and noticed that the world was no longer collapsing around him as if a shield had blocked the destruction from advancing further. It was no longer dark, and a glorious blue sky welcomed him as he struggled to stand up. He could hear faint voices that sounded like his friends. He felt strange as he looked at the fireflies. They were now flying in rhythm around him as if they were drawn towards him by an unknown force. They started coming closer together, and then they started merging into more prominent points of light. Mike looked in awe as the lights coalesced together into a mini-Sun and from there a radiant figure stepped out. Her outline showcased a head covered by buzz cut hair, big luminous eyes and a stern yet caring smile that melted Mike's heart.

'Eleven's back, awesome!' Mike couldn't restrain himself, he smiled, and then he started laughing. The figure came to him in a steady pace and then stood right in front of him. The radiance slowly faded away as the figure resolved into a person whom Mike had known since the very first day he was born, but it felt as if he was seeing her after an eternity.

'Oh, how much I missed her,' Mike thought as he locked his eyes with the eyes of the girl standing right in front of him.

Jane *Eleven* Ives, the soulmate of Mike Wheeler spoke in a cheerful voice to her own soulmate, "Mike. I want to live."

"Why?" Mike needed an answer.

"Because I want to make friends, I want to eat Eggos with you, I want to ride the bike with Lucas, I want to play games with Dustin, I want to draw pictures with Will, I want to go fishing with Hopper, I want to go to the beach with my family, I want to study with Nancy, I want to hang Christmas light with Joyce."

She paused for a moment and then hugged Mike tightly and whispered, "I want to live a life which you always wanted me to have Mike. But we'll do it together."

I want to live so that you can keep the real promise that you have made, Mike Wheeler, Eleven had at last found her purpose in Mike's destiny.

The bell rang right against them. Mike smiled triumphantly and smirked at Eleven's fate, *'not this time.'* He held Eleven tightly in his arms; she felt so real. The world was fading into light around them, it was time to return to the present. Suddenly Eleven gasped and seized Mike strongly. He turned around and came face to face with an astonishing sight.

Somewhere in front of them, somewhere that was neither far nor close, a giant sword was partially buried into the earth. The hilt was made with something that glowed like the sun, but the blade outshone it like a Supernova. Two figures stood facing each other on two sides of the sword. Both resembled Eleven, but one of the figures possessed magnificent wings made of light while the other one was wrapped in ominous clouds made of darkness. The figures gripped the hilt of the sword at the same time, and the world exploded in a flash of light.

The residents of the room kept staring in reverence as if they had seen the most majestic sight they had ever witnessed in their entire lives. Mike Wheeler had wielded Destiny to bring Eleven back from the clutches of her Fate. In the war between Love and Hate, Hope had emerged victorious.

Jim's knees buckled, and he fell the floor. He couldn't find any words to speak, so he kept sobbing. Nancy helped Steve to get back on his

feet, if his jaw dropped any further, he could have probably fit a bowling ball inside his mouth. Jonathan rested his arm on his mother's shoulder who was crying hysterically now.

Dustin, Lucas, and Max moved to the couch, and no one stopped them. They moved closer and saw Mike and Eleven gazing intently into each other's eyes and whispering;

"Do you promise to be with me?"

"Forever!"

A/N: The final and the most significant chapter of Fireflies. I had always wondered what the Promise really meant until one night, I found the answer. And now you know the truth as well.

Hope you guys liked the story, the first part of my Stranger Things Extended Universe. **Please leave a comment if you had enjoyed the story or if you have any feedbacks.**

There are many unanswered questions and hidden secrets spread all over Fireflies. You will find their answers in the next stories; starting with Arc III - Redemption and beyond.